

GENDER, STYLE, TECHNOLOGY:  
THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF MOTORCYCLE CULTURE

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Sociology

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

DECEMBER 2013

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## Acknowledgements

There are far too many people to whom I owe thanks for their part in the successful completion of this project, so this brief and limited expression of gratitude will have to suffice.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my other half, Kate, for her patience, tolerance, and encouragement. Many thanks are owed to Beatrice and Oliver for their positive contributions to my day-to-day existence in the few moments between work, school, and other obligatory tasks: I look forward to seeing your smiles continue for years to come. I must also express my appreciation for our extended family, because we could not have survived the past few years had it not been for their support.

Of course, I'd like to express my utmost appreciation to Dr. Ben Agger, my thesis committee chair, for being the calm that counters my tempest. I'd like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Heather Jacobson and Dr. Jason Shelton, for their constructive contributions and for persistently wrangling me as I continue to delve into life. I'd also like to specifically thank a few of the shining stars in my academic experiences thus far: Dr. Ray Eve, for inspiring curiosity; Dr. Karl Petruso, for setting a standard of excellence and expecting the same of others; Dr. Linda Rouse, for so drastically improving my horrid writing skills (I know I still have a lot to learn!); Dr. Luanne Frank, for opening my eyes; and the Sociology Cohort, for all the conversation, study groups, shared notes, shoulders to cry on, shared glories, and good times.

I also owe many thanks to my friends and acquaintances outside the academic realm, most of which tolerated my near-constant inquiries regarding their perspectives on motorcycles, media, and culture. Your overwhelming kindness is appreciated, and I hope this paper does justice to the knowledge and experiences you've all so willingly shared.

November 21, 2013

Abstract

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This thesis demystifies the cultural process of symbolic interpretation and appropriation within contemporary American motorcycle culture by using literature review and cultural analysis to explore the impact and influence of technological and aesthetic developments within a socio-historical context. Several aspects of motorcycle culture are addressed to develop a holistic understanding: the origins of motorcycles from their bicycle counterparts; motorcycles as a gendered phenomenon within American society; the affective experience of motorcycling and relating those affective experiences to the act of constructing one's identity as a motorcyclist; the symbolic appropriation of technological developments within motorcycle culture; how technological developments beyond the realm of motorcycles directly impact motorcycle culture; and motorcycle culture as an ever-growing, ever-changing, dynamic, social entity worthy of continued academic investigation in an effort to understand symbolic cultural exchange. This research demystifies the decentralized nature of motorcycle culture for the non-participant while preserving the value of motorcyclists as individuals deserving respect, appreciation, and understanding. It is not the purpose of this research to objectify individuals, communities, or cultures. Rather, it serves as a foundation for the continued expansion of academic appreciation surrounding this rich and diverse sub-culture.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Riding a motorcycle is a balancing act. The rider, with every muscle and movement, influences and directs the motorcycle's behavior, yet the rider is not in a state of isolated control. Rather, he or she is in a constant state of assessing, preparing and reacting, ad infinitum. The rider must appropriately respond to constantly changing external conditions, because the sand on the backside of the corner, the car coming over the yellow line, and the territorial dog running under the tire are all direct threats to life and limb. The rider must operate within the performance limitations of the vehicle, because will alone will not keep a motorcycle upright through the apex of a corner once the tires have lost traction due to a primitive suspension system. The rider must balance his or her thoughts and behaviors, so as to not wander into a curb or off the shoulder, because even just a distracted glance over the shoulder at an inopportune moment may result in drastic outcomes. The rider is not directing the situation from some safe and distant command center via detached controls, he or she is perpetually engaged in a balancing act amid an amalgamation of forces, both physical and temporal.

Much like the forces of gravity, friction, heat and motion, riders must also contend with an abundance of social and cultural forces. While, relatively speaking, overt sexism and racism are less socially acceptable in contemporary American society, similar forms of stereotyping, bias, and pre-conceived interpretations of individuals based on outward appearances still run rampant, especially within motorcycle culture. With the continued rise of commercialism, systems of social division based on overt physical characteristics (e.g. race and gender) continue, yet we may be witnessing a rise in cultural differentiation as signified by an individual's consumption choices regarding technology, aesthetics and style. The intentional and unintentional expression of cultural alignment within consumer

culture results in the idea that an individual's identity is intertwined the products they acquire and display, and motorcyclists must balance these perceptions.

Assumptions are often made about American motorcyclists' character, political leanings, and social motivations based simply on what type of jacket they are wearing, and what type of motorcycle they are sitting on. These assumptions are made by riders and non-riders alike, giving all who take part a voice in the process of symbolic interpretation and cultural maintenance. Making and acting on assumptions about a person based on consumer choices and personal presentation are central to the manifestation of cultural stereotypes. Individuals, often in an effort to defy stereotypes, appropriate symbols in new ways to create sub-cultures distinct from previously existing cultural stereotypes. New sub-cultures spawn new symbols and symbolic interpretations, and those new symbols and interpretations are then socially contested in the arena of cultural exchange, thereby furthering the social process of interpreting and appropriating cultural symbols. The continued process of symbolic cultural exchange creates a social realm of cultural expansion and diffusion, where the abundance of cultural symbols and their contested interpretations provide individuals potential avenues to appropriate symbols in a process of self-identification as a motorcyclist, and as an individual within the larger scope of culture.

This research is also a balancing act. Individuals engage in symbolic appropriation for the purpose of identity construction and cultural alignment in many facets of consumer culture. As a member of the riding community, and for the purpose of this research, I have chosen to use motorcycle culture as a platform for theoretical analysis of the abstract process of appropriation and display of cultural symbols and interpretations. This paper discusses motorcycle culture, but it is my intention is to



explore contested symbolic meaning and identity construction within consumer culture in a broader sense.

Quantitative research on motorcyclists exists, yet most of these efforts have been minimal in depth, focusing on the development of data that provides little information about the members of the motorcycling community, their motivations, or motorcycle culture (e.g. AMA 2010; NSC 2007; NTSA 1995). The sociological research regarding motorcycle culture in the United States has typically been somewhat limited in perspective: studies of outlaw motorcyclists or clubs; comparing and contrasting other rider groups to outlaws; and women's roles in the motorcycling community. While the aforementioned studies provide valuable perspectives about portions of the motorcycling community, they do little to address the motorcycling community as a whole, how technological developments over time have drastically altered the cultural landscape, or the ways in which the cultural symbols are appropriated for self-identification as a motorcyclist.

Acknowledging the limitations of a Master's thesis, this paper is the result of my endeavor to address questions about cultural exchange and symbolic appropriation that have arisen during my involvement in the riding community. This research employs theoretical analysis in an effort to demystify motorcycle culture for non-riders with little exposure to the greater motorcycling community, to provide a foundation for further analysis of the motorcycling community and its members, and to develop an understanding of socially mediated cultural symbols as cultural capital. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the symbolic exchange within motorcycle culture by examining the socio-historical context of the development of motorcycles, the development of motorcycle-related technologies and resulting aesthetic and stylistic trends, and how those trends signify underlying cultural appropriation for identity

construction. It is also my hope that this research provides the academic community with a broader and deeper understanding of the affective experience of motorcycling, paying special attention to how the affective experience of motorcycling blurs the boundaries between human and machine, the act of motorcycling and the act of being a motorcyclist, thereby emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between technology and motorcycle culture.

The foundations of this research lie in the presentation of theoretical, qualitative and quantitative research from the perspective of an active participant, with years of experience in observation, participation, and inquiry, for the primary purpose of demystifying the complex symbolic landscape surrounding the process of cultural exchange within the motorcycling community. Gender studies, symbolic interaction, interpretive sociology, cultural studies, consumption and lifestyle studies, and critical theory have profoundly influenced my perspective and approach regarding this research.

While this paper discusses motorcycles, motorcyclists, and motorcycle culture in an effort to further the academic understanding of the motorcycling community, it is important to remember that the subject matter regarding the motorcycling community is presented merely to illustrate a larger topic at hand – the social process of cultural creation, maintenance, and differentiation prompted by the adaptation and implementation of technological, aesthetic and stylistic developments within a socio-historical context. Therefore, even though this investigation focuses on the motorcycling community, its insights may also prove valuable in furthering our understanding of how symbolic appropriation in the process of identity construction plays a role within cultural creation, maintenance, and differentiation in a much broader sense. Exploring the role of technology, aesthetics, and style within the context of this specific culture simultaneously

further the academic investigation of various other sub-cultures and counter-cultures: hippy, punk, hip-hop, gangster, goth, emo, skater, hipster, to name a few.

However, it is not the intention of this research to serve as a complete overview of motorcycle culture either. There exist myriad sources for individuals to gain greater insight of the many aspects of motorcycle culture and its sub-sects. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore the process of symbolic appropriation through contested interpretations of cultural symbols, and to explore how those symbols are appropriated in identity construction and cultural differentiation within the motorcycling community. This research will accomplish the aforementioned purpose by specifically investigating the relationship between technology, aesthetics and style within motorcycle culture, placing special emphasis on technology's symbiotic role in personal experience, interpersonal communication, and identity construction as a motorcyclist and, more broadly, a member of the motorcycling community.

#### Why Study Motorcycle Culture?

Motorcycles themselves have come a long way since their development late in the 19th century, in both technological development and societal value. Yet, as William Thompson (2009) illustrates when exploring pseudo-deviance and new bikers, motorcycle culture is still largely left out of the realm of academic study, except with regard to outlaw clubs. Wendy Moon, in *American Icons* (2006), explains that motorcycles and the act of motorcycling have gone from being originally perceived as a gentleman's pastime to becoming a symbol of unbridled hyper-masculinity, due to the influx of post-WWII veterans and the cheap military surplus motorcycles, and motorcycles have now maneuvered their way into a status of fairly widespread acceptance from American mainstream society. However, Melissa Pierson explains in *The Perfect Vehicle* (1997), throughout these changes in the cultural landscape of motorcycling, there have

been ongoing debates about who should ride, what it is to be a motorcyclist, and how the motorcycling community relates to mainstream society.

Several researchers have noted that social conflicts such as those mentioned above can be witnessed most readily by observing the rising proportion of riders who are not upper-class, male, WASPs (Conner 2009; Hunt 1990; Levingston, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman 2003; Smith 1987). Alford and Ferriss point out, in *Motorcycle* (2007), that as previously marginalized groups have been integrated into the mainstream, they have experienced an increasing accessibility to motorcycles and greater opportunities to take part in motorcycling. These changes in ridership and public image lead one to see how motorcycles themselves, and the technological and aesthetic selections surrounding motorcycles, represent much more than the metal, plastic, and rubber of which they are comprised. In *Bikers* (2000), Suzanne McDonald-Walker explains that motorcycles and their corresponding consumer goods are quite literally tangible symbols within society, and the meaning of those symbols is often contested by groups competing to define and frame the value of motorcycles and motorcycle culture differently.

Most motorcyclists express their identity, at least in some degree, by aligning themselves with certain technological and aesthetic developments. Yet, these decisions and expressions are isolated acts, because riders' individual preferences are socially mediated, as are the other riders' definitions by which one's decisions or values are compared. When one ponders the socially challenged interpretations of these symbols, it leads to the realization that individual consumption habits and the socially mediated symbolic value of technological and aesthetic selections prove to be largely important to riders' self-identification as motorcyclists - perhaps even as important, if not more so, than the act of riding itself.

Conspicuous consumption, the act of purchasing and displaying consumer goods to express one's position in society, in motorcycle culture is distinct from the leisurely act of motorcycling itself. Robert Stebbins, in *Leisure and Consumption* (2009), clarifies, "...the end of consumption is to have something, while the end of leisure is to do something" (2009:ix). Stebbins' statement illustrates consumption and leisure are not the same things. However, when motorcycling, a rider must ride a consumer good (motorcycle) in the process of leisure. This state of simultaneous display and action results in a blurring between consumption and leisure, between product and identity. Rider negotiate symbolic value within the motorcycling community when they make choices about what kind of bike to ride, what style armor to wear, and what accessories to use. Because of the public display of these choices, as there are no tinted windows to hide behind on a motorcycle, riders likely place value in not only the act of motorcycling, but in the acquisition of goods related to motorcycling, both of which become expressions of that rider's self-identification as a motorcyclist. The interpersonal process of maintaining one's identity as a motorcyclist further blurs the line between consumption and leisure, as evidenced by the display of consumer goods to the others while riding, because the act of displaying the consumer goods while riding potentially becomes a form of leisure in itself.

It is important to recognize that the technological and aesthetic goods that riders acquire through consumption, whether color-matched bikes and gear or completely chromed rolling pieces of art that just happen to be motorcycles, are much more than simply the tangible objects themselves: riders are acquiring socially mediated symbols, and the varying interpretations attached to those symbols. Even the act of becoming a motorcycle rider makes a symbolic statement. As Potter (2005) explains, "[i]n becoming a motorcyclist, an individual [makes] a set of statements and value judgments, which

[makes] it possible for others to place them in society.” However, this statement further blurs the distinction Stebbins claims to exist between consumption and leisure as it is now possible to imagine that to display the artifacts one has acquired through consumption may actually be an act of leisure, in and of itself.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen lays out the concept of conspicuous consumption, which greatly increases the social value of consumer action by exploring the ways in which distinctive goods or services act as social indicators of wealth and prosperity. This leads one to wonder how riders’ technological and aesthetic selections serve to create and perpetuate self-differentiation within the motorcycling community, and the ramifications of such differentiation. In their exploration of sex roles in outlaw clubs, Quinn and Forsyth (1987) point out the importance of considering that the relationship between a tangible object as a meaningful symbol and the societal repercussions that arise due to conflict and competition over differing definitions of that object’s symbolic value. Conflicting interpretations of the object’s symbolic value allows and encourages individuals to become personally vested in the creation and maintenance of their own perceptions of what motorcycles and motorcycle related goods mean to them (2009). The personal process of symbolic interpretation and appropriation is an integral part of developing an identity as a motorcyclist, because they must contend with motorcycle related symbol when becoming members of motorcycle culture. However, individuals interpret and appropriate cultural symbols differently to align with their perceptions of what it means to be a motorcyclist, resulting in drastically varying idealizations of what it means to be a motorcyclist or biker (W. Thompson 2009). These idealizations then enter the social realm of cultural exchange as individuals and groups within motorcycle culture engage in discourse regarding the contested symbols and the differing interpretations.

Gary Kieffner (2005), addressing police discrimination against Harley riders, explains that the differences between contemporary sport bike riders as contrasted with more traditional outlaws and bikers are blatant and overt at the surface level: motorcycles, aesthetic choices, and typical modifications. The outward expressions of symbolic appropriation, such as the examples pointed out by Kieffner, indicate significant differences in how the groups view what it is to be a motorcyclist. Contemporary sport bike riders and more traditional outlaws and bikers idealize the motorcyclist in profoundly different ways, they then appropriate symbols from their idealization to incorporate in the self-image, and then make technological and aesthetic choices based on those choices. While these selections are somewhat personal (e.g. an individual decides to purchase a vintage BMW rather than a brand new Harley-Davidson) the resulting subsets of riders who find commonality in their choices help create cultural differentiation and distinct subcultures within the motorcycling community (W. Thompson 2009). It is with an awareness of both intentional and unintentional symbolic appropriation that this paper will explore the process of cultural creation and differentiation, as impacted by the cultural assimilation and self-identification with various technological and aesthetic developments.

Furthering academic study of motorcycling culture is important for several reasons, including: (1) motorcyclists are a deviant population that choose a mode of transportation with an inherently increased level of exposure; (2) the current landscape of motorcycle riders is more broad and inclusive than ever before, meaning that the current cultural landscape of the motorcycling community is a new social circumstance; (3) the motorcycling community offers a basis from which to learn more about how people in social situations interact through technological and aesthetic selection, oftentimes sharing quite a bit about one another without ever saying a word; (4) it will build upon our knowledge of how riders' technological and aesthetic selection behaviors influence and

are influenced by lifestyle, expanding beyond the dominant explanations of motorcyclists seen most often in existing academic research and the popular media; and, (5) through the development and expansion of knowledge and insight, this research will transform our understandings and assumptions of the motorcycling community into a more full and accurate awareness of the cultural processes at play.

#### Scope and Sequence

Chapter 2 discusses the emergence of motorcycle culture from bicycle culture, presenting a number of topics regarding the gendered role of technology in the development of motorcycle culture, and discusses women's struggles with participating in what was largely defined as a masculine endeavor. The conflict regarding gender roles within motorcycle culture exemplifies how technological developments are subject to cultural forces, in that motorcycles *become* masculine through symbolic appropriation. The chapter then addresses contemporary motorcycle culture's changes in ridership, overviews a few of the causes for those changes, and lays a foundation for further exploration of contemporary male riders.

Chapter 3 begins by addressing the intimate relationship between humans, technology, and style, as exemplified by the motorcycle. The chapter begins by framing the motorcycle as a man-machine interface, thereby laying a foundation to discuss the affective experience of motorcycling, and how the affective experience of motorcycling serves as a means and motivator for social exchange. The chapter continues by exploring how the selective implementation of technological developments and aesthetics opens a symbolic exchange for identity development and expression.

Chapter 4 builds upon the previous conceptual exploration of interpersonal exchange as a means of identifying one's self as a motorcyclist by exploring the ways in which communication technologies have altered and amplified interactions between



motorcyclists and non-motorcyclists alike. This chapter presents how communication technologies such as cell phones, the internet, and global positioning systems have drastically altered the circumstances surrounding the act of motorcycling and other avenues of participating in motorcycle culture. The chapter also explores how these technologies have opened the riding landscape to those who may not have otherwise ridden, and how these technologies have led to significant increases in opportunities for non-riders to participate in motorcycle culture.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the relationship between technology, style and identity. It reviews the cultural processes of identity construction via symbolic appropriation, which serves to define culture as a process of contested symbolic exchange between participants. Culture is framed as a social platform for the assignment and appropriation of symbolic meaning, a process that involves an extensive amount of feedback from individual participants. The aforementioned process of cultural feedback is then investigated to understand how it is responsible for the fragmented nature of motorcycle culture. The chapter analyzes how the understanding of cultural fragmentation may be applied to other areas of cultural investigation, and concludes with a call for more research.

## Chapter 2

### Masculinity and Motorcycles: a Gendered History of Motorcycle Culture

Motorcycles, from their initial development as motorized bicycles to their continued existence as forms of transportation and leisure, continue to exist as contested symbols in the debate over gender roles. Gender theorists associate technology with masculinity, and nature with femininity (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Kelkar and Nathan 2002; Mellstrom 2004). This dichotomy comes to the forefront in the marketing and manufacturing of bicycles for both men and women in the mid to late 1800's. The attempts of early manufacturers and marketers to include women in the enjoyment and practicality of the bicycle resulted in struggles to reclaim the bicycle as a symbol of masculinity. This struggle to gender the symbolic value of the bicycle continued and overflowed into the realm of the newly invented motorcycle. Joshua Maynard explains, in his research regarding masculinity and motorcycling, that “[c]ontrol and mastery of the motorcycle in the physical realm is conceptually linked to the virtual mastery of the qualities the motorcycle is thought to embody, such as the traditional masculine qualities of technomorphism (modernity, abstraction, and efficiency)” (2008:5).

This chapter explores the historically gendered approach to technology, with specific focus on the bicycle as an introduction and overview to the emerging struggles over the symbolic value of the motorcycle. It investigates the historical battle to appropriate motorcycles as masculine symbols from the mid-1800s through contemporary society. The following sections explore the gendered conflict that arose from Victorian ideals related to bicycles as applied to early motorcycles, overviews changing perceptions of the motorcycle due to the post-WWII social environment, and concludes with a brief investigation into the effects of recent technological developments on contemporary motorcycle culture.

As Maynard (2008) explains, although human experience and history may be theorized in a nonlinear manner, it is very difficult to discuss, much less write about motorcycle culture in this way. On the other hand, it is also impossible to trace the development of a social phenomenon simply by listing a set of dates in chronological order. Therefore, this chapter explores the motorcycling as a contested social symbol by analyzing the convergence of technology and history through the context of change in gendered perceptions within motorcycle culture.

#### The Mechanical Male

In "Machines and Masculine Subjectivity" (2004), Ulf Mellstrom explores how agricultural machinery was used to reinforce patriarchal ideologies that marginalized women in Western civilizations. During the turn of the nineteenth century, tools and other technological developments were primarily developed and used by men, forcing women out of the public labor sphere and further limiting their productive possibilities (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993). Judith Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1999), explains that gendered technologies demonstrate that gender should not be conceived solely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a biological sex, but that gender must also include the apparatus of production through which the genders themselves are established. Maynard illustrates this point by explaining that men and woman are able to constitute and sustain sexual identity by using gender specific forms of technology, and goes on to state that the gendered division of labor had been maintained by men's control of technology and women through the use of physical force and violence, economic, cultural, and informational capital (which he refers to as technological discourse), and symbolic capital arising from men's higher status in society (2008). However, as Maynard explains, the dramatic shift from subsistence living to paid labor, due to the Industrial Revolution, "enshrined masculine technical discourse and men's access to technology in

the institutions of the Western state” (2008:19). Men, as employers and employees working closely with technology, shared the glory of advancement provided by technological developments.

Butler explains that gendered technologies become a form of institutionalized power that naturalizes the foundation of the nature/culture divide and the resulting strategies of domination (1990). While technologies and their uses have changed over time, the gendered associations of such developments has changed very little (Mellstrom 2004). Maynard explains that “if it is always men who engineer, build and repair machines, this promotes an archetype of the 'mechanical male' that is maintained by certain men through reiteration of technical lingo and jargon” (2008:20). The creation of women as the ‘other’ is then used to exclude women and other outgroups to create what Virginia Scharff calls the “fellowship of the wrenches” (1991:10). Yet, excluding women from the realm of technical discourse is not a recent phenomenon, as the gendered associations regarding man and machine had long been established by the time motorcycles were invented (Maynard 2008). As social symbols that are not inherently feminine or masculine by design, it is most interesting to investigate how motorcycles and their technological components are typified as being so.

#### Two Wheels in Two Worlds

Early motorcycling culture inherited a technological and cultural legacy from bicycling, in part because early motorcycles were quite literally heavy-framed bicycles with motors attached. Even today, bicycles and motorcycles share many attributes, but bicycles have not always resembled what we envision today. Ellen Garvey (1995), in her analysis of bicycle advertiser techniques, outlines the development of the bicycle: Though the history is contested, it is generally agreed that the Penny Farthing bicycle, developed in 1871 by James Starley, was the first efficient and widely manufactured

bicycle design. It was characterized by the much larger front wheel with the rider positioned almost directly above it, cranking two pedals that powered the front hub. The safety bicycle, developed in the 1880s by John Starley, featured two equally sized wheels, a mid-seated rider position, and a chain to power the rear hub. It was much more stable than previous bicycle designs, hence the name.

The safety bicycle offered a new form of affordable transportation to those who were too poor to own and maintain a horse. Still, in *The Rites of Men* (1999), Varda Burstyn points out that the original Penny Farthing and the first safety bicycles were impossible for women to ride because Victorian women were expected to uphold strict ideals of femininity, which limited them from wearing anything that would allow them to operate a bicycle without exposing too much skin or having clothing become stuck in the bicycle's gears. Due to bicycle manufacturers' recognition of the potential female market hindered by Victorian mandates of feminine dress, bicycle producers began creating different models for men and women. Safety bicycles became an early version of what most people envision a contemporary bicycle to be, and women's safety bicycles featured a lowered upper frame that permitted them to wear skirts and dresses (Garvey 1995:69), as required by patriarchal expectations of the time, but the frame design also limited the potential of clothing being caught in the cranks. The gendered production of bicycles continued as designers began specifically marketing bicycles to women (Garvey 1995). Maynard explains that, "whereas the high-wheeled bicycle had symbolized men's mobility and domination of the outdoors, manufacturers' aggressive marketing of the safety bicycle to both men and women proved more effective in attracting sales" (Maynard 2008:21), leading to women eventually comprising nearly a quarter to a third of the bicycle market (Garvey 1995). Some contemporary bicycle manufacturers still

produce women's models featuring the lowered top tube rooted in Victorian patriarchal expectations of women's behavior.

Several researchers have noted that bicycles altered the gendered landscape in America at that time; Susan B. Anthony explained that bicycling and women bicyclists were pivotal to the changing tides of women's position in patriarchal society (Ferrari 1996:xii; Mullins 2003:15). The bicycle was received well by women (Garvey 1995), often seen as a means of broadening a woman's world by providing opportunities to wander beyond the confines of the family and home. Some even argued that the bicycle was beneficial for women by "strengthening the uterus" (Garvey 1995:70). But, others argued that bicycling was a masculine activity, and cartoons in national magazines portrayed women bicyclists as social deviants and menaces (Maynard 2008).

Some medical authorities even worried for the loss of sexual purity of women riders because they believed that bicycling may have stimulated women's genitals, such as Robert Dickenson's paper on bicycling women:

The saddle can be tilted in every bicycle as desired.... In this way a girl... could, by carrying the front peak or pommel high, or by relaxing the stretched leather in order to let it form a deep, hammock-like concavity which would fit itself snugly over the entire vulva and reach up in front, bring about constant friction over the clitoris and labia. This pressure would be much increased by stooping forward, and the warmth generated from vigorous exercise might further increase the feeling. (1895:86)

Manufacturers and marketers responded to complaints and concerns similar to Dickenson's by stressing feminine bicycling techniques; upright riding position, split saddles (eliminating genital contact), and higher handlebars (Garvey 1995). Even as women were incorporating their newfound technological capabilities through bicycle riding and ownership, they were still subject to institutionalized forms of patriarchal oppression (Maynard 2008). However, marketers cleverly continued to push for more female participation in the bicycling community by presenting bicycling as a feminine

activity that aided them in their assigned tasks within a patriarchal society, as opposed to a deviant task that threatened masculine superiority (Scharff 1991).

Bicycling culture was characterized as friendly and welcoming in popular media representations, and in many accounts, the bicycle became almost human by functioning as a common ground through which strangers can more easily initiate introductions and continued interaction (Garvey 1995). Nearing the end of the nineteenth-century, bicycling was characterized in popular discourse as representing several cultural themes later associated with motorcycles: nationalism, individualistic freedom, proximity to nature, and of enabling a common bond between riders (Maynard 2008). Some at the time, including Susan B. Anthony, viewed the bicycle as offering a solution to women's inequality in Western society. However, the bicycle industry's decision to differentiate bicycles for men and women perpetuated the gender divide. While bicycles did provide an entry point for women to engage in and express physical and technological equality with men, bicycle manufacturer's decision to advertise the bicycle's value as a tool for women to complete their feminine tasks limited the social reality of equality. The social and cultural pressure to conform to gendered norms, despite bicycle manufacturer's progressive decision to make bicycles available to women, resulted in the continued marginalization of women and limited their potential freedom by propagating gendered technologies (Garvey 1995).

The story of the bicycle provides a social and historical context for the development of the motorcycle as a symbol of masculinity. The motorcycle not only emerged from bicycles, the bicycle's popularity initiated the concept of maintained roadways and cheap individual transportation, and many bicycle manufacturers later tried moving into motorcycle production (Koerner 2007; Osgerby 2005; Scharff 1991). When discussing the myths surrounding motorcycling, Timothy Holmes (2007) explains that the

relationship between bicycles and motorcycles elucidates cultural similarities in the gendered forms of technology, and provides a platform from which to analyze the social contexts surrounding the cultural repercussions of those associations.

### *Birth of the Machine*

Out of cartoons like the 'Vélocipédraisavaporienne' and steam-powered prototypes built by Louis-Guillaume Perreaux, the motorcycle was born (Maynard 2008). Jeremy Wilson's biography of T.E. Lawrence explains that after Nicholas Otto patented the four-stroke internal-combustion engine, Gottlieb Daimler left his position under Otto to create his own engine design (1989). In 1883, Daimler invented the first gasoline-powered motorcycle. But, as Michael Partridge discusses in *Motorcycle Pioneers* (1976), that it was not until 1901 when the first practical motorcycle was invented by Eugene and Michael Werner. By 1914, manufacturers were beginning to install primitive suspensions, headlights, gears and clutches (Wilson 1989). Several researchers have noted that these early motorcycles were quite difficult to operate and maintain without breaking down because of their limited technological capabilities and the extremely rugged and poor condition of early roads, so riders were often required to repair their machine mid-trip with minimal equipment (Ferrar 1996; Mullins 2003; Zimmerman and Levingston 2003), and faced a constant threat of being stranded in the mostly rural environment of pre-WWI America (Russell 2005; Partridge 1976).

As the popularity of the motorcycle increased, significant populations in both rural and urban areas did not receive motorcycles or automobiles very positively because of the pollution, noise, and congestion they created (Gartman 2004; Maynard 2008). However, the novelty of motorized vehicles continued to attract attention (Ferrar 1996). Official organizations were soon developed to regulate and officiate sporting events for motorcyclists, eventually giving rise to the American Motorcycle Association in 1924



(AMA 2007). The cultural phenomenon of motorcycling as a recreational activity took hold, and was largely perceived by the public as a 'gentlemen's pursuit,' popularized by such public figures as Lawrence of Arabia and King George VI (Holmes 2007:6; McDonald-Walker 2000:27). From these beginnings, Maynard explains that motorcycles became bourgeois symbols of the freedom and leisure in Western society afforded to white males with higher levels of economic prosperity, often evoking hostility and envy from those unable to share in ownership and enjoyment of such technological marvels (Maynard 2008). While the motorcycle industry was eager to expand the market to women by including them in advertisements riding alongside men (Osgerby 2005), motorcycle rider associations were limiting any opportunities to do so by excluding women from receiving formal recognition for their riding achievements (Koerner 2007).

Since the very beginning of motorcycle culture, women have been active owners and riders in American motorcycle culture, albeit often contested members (Garber 2002). Yet, the motorcycle has been historically identified as a Western symbol of masculine power and dominance. When considering the conflicting cultural dynamics surrounding female participation in the act of riding motorcycles but exclusion from the collective image of the motorcyclist, it is easy to identify the exclusionary tactics at play within motorcycle culture. Despite the fact that "[t]here is nothing inherent within the male or female body that necessarily grants one individual an advantage over another in terms of being able to enjoy the experience of motorcycling," women were largely excluded from the culture surrounding motorcycles, which leads to the understanding that, to women in this time period, "motorcycling can be an act of [symbolic and physical] subversion through which agents revolt against the dominant discourses of heteronormativity in North American culture" (Maynard 2008:6).

Women, whether intentional or not, took to riding motorcycles as a form of rebellion against the masculine dominance of technology and leisure, and many of those women faced direct challenges for their symbolically defiant acts. In 1910, an 18 year-old female racer named Clara Wagner defeated most of her competitors in an endurance race, but was refused her trophy by the officiating organization because she was a woman (Ferrar 1996). Though some of her competitors took up a collection and presented their own award (Mullins 2003), it was apparent that women were not yet formally allowed to participate in the gentlemen's activity of motorcycling. In 1915, Effie and Avis Hotchkiss, a mother-daughter duo, became the first women to make a round-trip transcontinental motorcycle journey taking three months (Ferrar 1996). In 1916, Adeline and Augusta Van Buren, sisters, rode cross-country to demonstrate that women could serve as riders in the military (AMA 2010), becoming the first two women to cross the continent on solo motorcycles, and the first women to ride Pike's Peak (Mullins 2003; Ferrar 1996).

These women – enabled by affluence and sponsorships to afford and participate in the relatively expensive activity of motorcycling, and motivated to demonstrate women's rightful place as members of the motorcycling community – still faced great resistance from those who deemed motorcycling an unladylike activity (Koerner 2007), and they are still largely excluded from motorcycle history (Ferrar 1996). These women served as personifications of the feminist movement within motorcycle culture, and faced many difficulties due to what they represented. Maynard explains that the adversity these historical figures faced didn't necessarily arise from the simple fact that they were women, but “had more to do with whether or not they challenged heteronormative ideals of masculine superiority” (Maynard 2008:35). Their motorcycling achievements threatened societal beliefs surrounding gendered technology and physical activities, so

the achievements of these women were interpreted as symbolic threats of masculine domination in many facets of social life.

In 1937, Dot Robinson finished second in her class in a two-day endurance race, and raced again in 1940 to win first place (Ferrar 1996). She, like Clara Wagner, was denied her trophy, and American Motorcycle Association Secretary E.C. Smith even attempted to ban women from participating in the race. In response, Robinson and supporters successfully petitioned against the rule, and continued participating in such events (AMA 2006). Again, the personal accomplishments for these woman came to represent political victories for the First Wave feminist movement (Maynard 2008:38). Effectively, supporters of these women riders were redefining symbolic interpretations of the motorcycle. The symbolic value of motorcycles, as had been appropriated by wealthy, white males (hence the term 'gentlemen's pastime'), was being culturally redefined to include women. Given that motorcycling does not necessitate male organs or masculine self-identification, it is easy to understand that individuals are drawn to motorcycling culture regardless of gender. It is also easy to see then, that the motorcycle was beginning to symbolize freedom from domination, whether due to privilege or tenacity. Understanding the symbolic conflict over gendered motorcycles in the early years of motorcycle culture leads one to wonder why motorcycling, and the freedom from domination it symbolizes, has been largely associated with hyper-masculine, blue-collar males. The following section briefly overviews the emergence of the outlaw motorcyclist as an American icon.

#### Rise of the Outlaw

After World War II, the soldiers who were not quite so lucky or so well equipped to return to the American Dream rejected the wage-earner consumer lifestyle they were expected to adopt. Today, professionals might say that some of these soldiers were

experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, others were disaffected, and others only knew a military lifestyle and had not yet learned how to be peace-time wage-earners (Moon 2006). These men found one another through their passions for powerful machines that could provide diversion, camaraderie, and meaning; so they “found one another, found motorcycles, and formed clubs” (Garber 2002:18).

Moon states:

Harley (and motorcycles in general) became the icon of freedom and transgression in the aftermath of World War II when the new social normal became an economic model; happiness meant bigger and better buying, and stability meant cookie-cutter lifestyles with father in a 9 to 5 job and mother at home. Chain restaurants, motels, and housing developments that, in the words of the old song, “looked just the same,” sprang up across the country like acne on a teen’s face. This contrast between war and peace was too discombobulating for some returning GIs, and they chose to opt out. (2006:310)

Amid the country’s post-war ideological shifts, the desire to find an enemy within its own borders was strong, as exemplified by the rise of McCarthyism, the Red Scare, and the Cold War. Over the years following the war, the media and popular culture eventually came demonize these young men that chose not to get in line and follow along. Those that served their country, and then found meaning in the camaraderie of motorcycle clubs, became misfits in the social eye because they chose not to conform to the wage-earner/consumer zeitgeist of post-WWII America (Garber 2002:7).

Garber explains that throughout the country, these groups grew into organized racing affiliations that young men continued to joined, often enjoying the friendship, competition, and familiarity. The clubs learned about one another and began to gather for racing events, getting together to work on their motorcycles, test their mettle, race, show off, and enjoy themselves. The motorcycle manufacturers helped sponsor the events, as did the motorcycles riders’ organizations (AMA 2006). Drawing upon their experiences with the aggression and violence of war, these clubs adopted the names of

flying fighter groups that were meant to describe a relationship with life and death that the warriors knew all too well (Barger 2005; Lavigne 1995; H. Thompson 1967).

The Hollister riot of 1947 is the most notorious moment when the veterans became social outsiders and criminal suspects. Locals and law enforcement of Hollister, California, were intimidated by the young, adrenaline-ridden men at the racing event. Garber claims that the American collective unconscious needed a new enemy to blame for current unrest, and the Hollister riot served to create the new victims: outlaw motorcyclists (Garber 2002:19). The next American Motorcycle Association sponsored race, the same racing federation that sponsored Hollister, also turned into a riot (Yates 1999). The AMA soon disowned these racing clubs and revoked their membership, claiming those riders and clubs were one-percent or the riding population giving the other riders a bad image (AMA 2006).

The photo of a supposedly drunken motorcyclist at the Hollister riot, which appeared in *Life* magazine, furthered the issue by serving as a catalyst to the belief that the overseas evil was suddenly becoming a local threat to the American way of life. Despite the fact that the photo was posed, it served to create a new enemy to fear right in America's back yards (Yates 1999). Young men with shared recreational interests became "demonic bedfellows" in the eye of American mainstream media (Garber 2002:19). Garber goes on to explain that these young heroes had become hoodlums through the *Life* magazine image, being relegated to the shadows of American society, so the Hell's Angels, Satan's Slaves, and Vagos became a new enemy that served as powerful symbols of the forbidden lust for freedom from the ascribed social norms of the time (2002). These young club members became forgotten soldiers of the Second World War, former heroes now demonized in the public eye for having experienced too much to

be able to return to the constrictive environment of suburban ideals and 9-5 wage labor (Garber 2002).

Margaret Mead, in *Culture and Commitment* (1970), posits that the cultural circumstances surrounding the 1950s and 1960s created a generation gap that gave rise to radicalized rifts between traditional values and new interpretations of society and social interaction. Those in power sought an enemy to take responsibility for this upheaval, and outlaw motorcyclists were blamed, rather than viewed as products of the socio-historical circumstances (Garber 2002). Yet, the most famous of the Hell's Angels, Sonny Barger once mused, "[n]obody ever said freedom was cheap" (Barger 2005:193). His conception that freedom is something that exists beyond the confines of a wage-earner/consumer lifestyle was presumably shared by the early outlaw club riders. The clubs and riders came to embrace the negative public image, adopting the one-percent label, further distancing themselves intentionally from those who did not accept their symbolically un-American, freedom-seeking behavior (Yates 1999). Hence, there grew a stronger sense of community within and amongst these clubs due to the rising negativity toward the young men flowing from those who followed the traditionally acceptable American model of the time (Barger 2005; Garber 2002). The shared feeling of solidarity outside mainstream society gave rise to what is commonly referred to as the "biker brotherhood" (W. Thompson 2009). The idea that bikers shared a collective goal to abandon mainstream expectations was eventually drafted into the by-laws of various one-percenter clubs, but the shared understanding that those who choose to oppose mainstream American values should support each other continues to exist beyond the boundaries of club membership, even today.

William Thompson explains that other evidence of the biker brotherhood can be found in the so-called biker code (2009). This code originates from the young club

members developing their own system of honor and integrity in order to fill the vacuum resulting from their marginalization and border-line exclusion from American mainstream society (Barger 2005). The biker code insists that riders, especially club members, never leave one-another in a time of need, on or off the bike. If a club member sees another motorcyclist on the side of the road, they must check on the rider's well-being, help with repairs, provide a ride to nearby help, or at least offer assistance, and will often hang around until help arrives (W. Thompson 2009). The biker code was a new set of cultural norms and taboos, lined out to replace the social mandates of mainstream American society that these riders abandoned. The biker code and club bylaws became the only laws these young misfits endorsed and followed, but they arose as a result of the aggressive marginalization facing the new sect of motorcyclists.

The demonization of these young riders and their clubs, resulting in the development of their own social code and norms, gave rise to what are referred to as the outlaw motorcycle clubs. Outlaw clubs admittedly reside outside the law, interpreted as traditional societal values, but are not necessarily criminal (Barger 2005). William Thompson explains, “[o]ut of work, and fresh from the camaraderie of the military, many of the young men hung around motorcycle garages and bars and formed motorcycle clubs and gangs” (2009:95). These grizzly-faced, tattooed, young men that refused to conform to post-WWII American norms became the new symbolic face of motorcycling. The freedom and rebellion they symbolized was a cultural extension of the early female riders, but these young riders did not share in the egalitarian, non-gendered view of motorcycle culture. In *Bike Lust* (2001), Barbara Joans explains that these clubs excluded women from membership, largely due to the male-only environment of the military, and, as they gained public notoriety, the clubs furthered the public perception of motorcycling as a man's activity, with a rider embodying hyper-masculine traits.

### *Women's Shifting Roles*

Brenda Stalcup, in *Women's Suffrage* (2000), suggests that the opportunities provided to women, resulting from soldiers being called off to war in the 40's and 50's, helped change the structure of the American family. In *Destined for Equality* (1998), Robert Jackson agrees with Stalcup that women at that time were beginning to own their economic, political, and sexual resources, and the women's movement grew (Jackson 1998; Stalcup 2000).

Garber explains that an obvious change occurred when war veterans returned to find their wives, mothers, and daughters unwilling to return to the subservient roles as dependent domestics, and accommodations occurred as new roles developed:

Women who had been 'emancipated' to do jobs once reserved for men – 'Rosie the Riveter' is an example – were expected to return to their roles as domestics and housewives as soldiers returned from duty. Mirroring the experience of some of the male soldiers, whose return home was fraught, particular women were psychically unable to make the expected accommodation. (2002:11)

In a continuation of this struggle to redefine gender roles, significant changes for women occurred during the 1960s while the country struggled to realize that freedom for African-Americans was still more of a concept than a reality. Civil rights and women's liberation movements attempting to gain acceptance from mainstream society - conversely coinciding with outlaw motorcyclists' exit from mainstream society - demonstrated a collective need for more than the traditionally acceptable expectations of an outdated patriarchal system biased toward wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant males: these movements were both individually liberating and socially revolutionary (Jackson 1998; Scharff 1991). Here, in the 1960s, the history of civil liberties for women and minorities in America shares some striking resemblance, though on opposite ends of the spectrum, with the exile of outlaw motorcyclists: women and minorities were protesting against many of the same concerns that led outlaws to abandon mainstream



society altogether (Garber 2002). Yet, it should not be confused that outlaw motorcyclists and civil rights groups were cooperative in any sense. Despite the shared distaste for American mainstream ideals of the time, outlaw motorcyclists still excluded women and people of color from membership. Outlaw motorcyclists still embodied many of the aspects of American mainstream society that prompted protest from civil rights advocates.

During the era of the Vietnam War, the previously marginalized members of American society – people of color, women, and a disenfranchised hyper-masculine youth – began to question the American mythos and the patriarchal system that supported it. In *Berkeley at War* (1989), William Rorabaugh states that baby boomers were empowered by their numbers and idealistic enthusiasm. As previously marginalized members of society began organizing and acting against the proverbial ‘man,’ “the lone motorcyclist came to represent the disenfranchised and fatherless, those looking for a sense of meaning and a new family” (Garber 2002:22). Outlaw clubs attracted social misfits, outcasts and rebels, and these clubs came to replace other nation states as the new threat to American ideals in a nation witnessing internal social upheaval (Yates 1999). Amid this turmoil, the biker chick was born as an incarnation of new social and sexual freedoms available to women (Garber 2002), partially owing to the advent of the birth control pill (Joans 2003). Sadly though, as Columbus Hopper and Johnny Moore (1990) discovered when investigating women’s roles in outlaw motorcycle culture, the biker chick was still a subservient role for women because they were primarily relegated to the pillion pad, a small seat attached to the back fender of a motorcycle, rather than independent and equal motorcycle owners and operators. Their position as passengers rather than operators physically and socially defined them as secondary to the male operator, continuing the subservience of women’s roles in motorcycle culture.

Quinn and Forsyth (1987) explore sex roles and hedonism in outlaw motorcycle groups, and their findings suggest that women's role as passengers, rather than solo operators of their own motorcycles, are more traditional - to standards of patriarchy - and subservient than the feminist ideals that gave rise to this new type of woman might suggest. However, female social revolutionaries who hopped on motorcycles in the 60s, like the pioneering women riders addressed earlier, help set the stage for solo women riders in contemporary society.

Motorcycles, stemming from their roots in Victorian era gendered technology, were originally considered a gentlemen's pastime, indicative of their symbolic association with the status and independence of wealthy white men. Women's early achievements in motorcycle culture set the stage for the motorcycle to become a symbol of freedom and rebellion for more than just the patriarchs of Victorian ideals. Then, some of the returning WWII veterans, unable to cope with the transition to wage-earner/consumer cultural expectations, appropriated the symbolic value of the motorcycle as a representation of their freedom and rebellion from the dominant societal norms of their time. However, the hyper-masculine outlaws did not share the egalitarian ideals of the First Wave feminists, and the symbolic interpretation of the motorcycle was fragmented once again, leaving three distinct interpretations: motorcycles as a gentlemen's pastime, motorcycles as a tool for gender equality and egalitarian social relationships, and motorcycles as tools for rebellion against societal norms. While these symbolic interpretations of the motorcycle share some common themes (e.g. independence, power, freedom), they serve to demonstrate the variety of ways in which differing groups appropriate the symbolic value of motorcycles to serve their own needs and desires.

### Cultural Diversification in Contemporary Ridership

As of 2006, less than 7% of Americans ride motorcycles (AMA 2007). Until recently, women riding any kind of motorcycle in the United States comprised of less than 10% of the riding population (AMA 2010). While riders are a small portion of the population, contemporary riders are increasingly diverse. Yet, several authors have noted that, since the 1950s, the image of motorcyclists has been largely shaped by outlaw motorcycle clubs, despite their self-reported status as being the one-percent who give motorcyclists a bad name (Barger, Zimmerman and Zimmerman 2001; Barger 2005; H. Thompson 1967). Most of the early iconic media portrayals were renegade motorcyclists, such as characters played by Marlon Brando and James Dean (Holmes 2007). These iconic rebels commonly embodied a rejection of American mainstream ideals (McDonald-Walker 2000; H. Thompson 1967; Watson 1980). They are symbolic personifications of the rebellious, hyper-masculine males that re-appropriated the motorcycle as a symbol of masculinity, albeit a masculine identity attempting to escape mainstream society rather than attempting to gain access to it.

Moon (2006) shares that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a slightly different breed of outlaw motorcyclist emerged, personified by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, as portrayed in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969). These hippie-bikers, though similar to outlaws motorcyclists in presentation, were much less likely to be involved in repeated acts of violence and were a long step away from the hyper-masculine post-war riders. More traditional outlaw motorcyclists often despised the hippie-bikers because they did not buy into the militaristic aspects of outlaw clubs (H. Thompson 1967). The motorcycle culture became further fragmented, as even the newest symbolic interpretation of motorcyclists, outlaws, suffered a split when incorporating the new type of rebellion emerging from 1960's and 1970's counter culture. Despite these rising conflicts over the

symbolic value of motorcycles and what it was to be a motorcyclist, there still was a feeling of brotherhood among motorcyclists that set them apart from those who drove cages (a colloquial term referring to any type of enclosed vehicle) (Moon 2006).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Japanese motorcycle manufacturers began marketing to middle-class, white-collar, suburbanite populations, which was a demographic that had been largely excluded from motorcycle culture up to that point. This influx of affordable and relatively reliable Japanese motorcycles accompanied by an advertising campaign targeted at middle-America is colloquially referred to as the 'Japanese invasion.' By the mid-1980s, motorcycling experienced a drastic resurgence, with motorcycle registrations reaching over 5.4 million in 1985, fueled largely by a new riding community of middle-class Baby Boomers increasing sales of foreign and domestic motorcycles (National Traffic Safety Administration (NTSA), 1995; National Safety Council (NSC), 2007). For the first time in the history of motorcycle culture, it was now socially acceptable for the middle-class Americans to participate in motorcycle culture. No longer was motorcycling relegated to the fringes of society: wealthy, white males; progressive feminists; hyper-masculine, veterans and renegades; and drug using, sexually liberated hippie-bikers. Consequently, motorcycling surged into the mainstream (Dulaney, 2005; Moon, 2006).

A few motorcyclists, Evil Knievel is among them, eventually reached celebrity status. Harley-Davidson, banking on the resurgence in riding's popularity, and newly freed from the catastrophe of American Machine and Foundry ownership, launched a massive advertising campaign – even rebranding their company image – to accommodate the new riding community (Moon 2006; Yates 1999). Japanese manufacturers were quick to counter Harley's campaign and increasing popularity by creating and marketing their own v-twin cruisers that copied the Harley-Davidson design

(Yates 1999). In 2007, motorcycle registrations reached an all-time high of over 6 million, with both middle-class men and women, aged 35 to 50, accounting for the largest number of sales (NSC 2007). The growing acceptance of motorcycling as a fashionable leisure activity in North America has prompted a new era in motorcycle culture: “No longer is the motorcyclist epitomized by the grizzled sneer of the bearded biker,” because rising interest and greater accessibility to motorcycling has lessened the monolithic imagery of the hyper-masculine male, yet the motorcycling remains largely masculine (Maynard 2008:7). As differing groups appropriated motorcycles to suit their goals, aims and self-image, the cultural shift and splits allowed more and more people to find something in motorcycle culture that they could relate to. Motorcycles now offer a plethora of symbolic associations: as a gentlemen’s pastime available to the socially privileged; a means for cultural inclusion and equitability for First Wave feminists; a symbol of freedom and rebellion against consumer culture and mainstream American ideals, for both the outlaws and the hippie-bikers; and as a socially acceptable leisure activity for middle-America. Over the historical development of motorcycle culture, the symbolic value of motorcycles has become increasingly contested, resulting in a diversification of what motorcycles and riders represent, and presenting potential cultural participants a wider array of symbolic interpretations to appropriate for their own means.

Data demonstrate that contemporary motorcycle riders are more diverse than they have ever been since the development of motorcycle registration statistics (AMA 2010). Increased rider diversity indicates that the process of symbolic appropriation and cultural diffusion are likely to continue in motorcycle culture. Due to significant changes in the financial, mechanical, and social requirements surrounding motorcycling, contemporary motorcycle culture includes people from all socio-economic strata, cultural backgrounds, and social positions (Maynard 2008). Contemporary motorcycle culture is

more democratic, egalitarian, and diverse than it has ever been, yet the representative face of motorcyclists remains distinctly masculine (Hostetler 2002; Joans 2001; Maynard 2008, McDonald-Walker 2000; Osgerby 2005; Russell 2005).

The fact that motorcycling is still largely identified as a masculine activity begs one to wonder why women ride, and to question their role in contemporary motorcycle culture. This research does not attempt to answer either of the aforementioned questions, but investigates the varying motivations and roles of female riders to further demonstrate the multitude of symbolic interpretations that comprise contemporary motorcycle culture. Garber (2002) does overview much of the research that investigates women's motivations: the standard response is described as being a love of the freedom provided by the bike and the open road, emulating a male family member, or the sense of belonging to a particular rider-oriented group or club. Yet, "[t]he apparent contradiction between the love of freedom and independence and the desire to belong to a group is not addressed" (Garber 2002:33). Perhaps these women, with their contradicting attitudes toward various aspects of motorcycling, are appropriating the symbolic value of motorcycling in different ways. Some might be drawn to the motorcycle's symbolic alignment with personal liberation, while others may be drawn to the increasingly inclusive aspect of contemporary motorcycle culture. It also seems that these women may perceive the ability to gain equal membership in motorcycle culture as an expression of personal liberation and choice.

While contemporary female riders have more options than ever before, within outlaw sub-culture, the role of women is clearly defined: although equally tough as the men, the equality stops there. Women in the outlaw community are considered property to be used for sexual and servant purposes, traded, and given or thrown away at the motorcyclist's discretion (Hopper and Moore 1990; Mullins 2003; H. Thompson 1967;

Watson 1980). Even now, despite decades of feminist progress, females still play many similarly subservient roles in today's new biker subculture. Motorcycling manufacturers and motorcycling events still employ women as sex symbols who are subservient to masculine domination. But, as opposed to the openly sexist behaviors of the AMA and masculine riders during the development of motorcycle culture, or the openly sexist behaviors of the hyper-masculine outlaw riders, contemporary motorcycle culture is endowed with a multi-faceted hypocrisy. Motorcycle culture's current epoch involves a number of wives, girlfriends, and solo female riders, many of whom are well-educated professionals, adopting a pseudo-deviant motorcycling persona in between their professional and personal responsibilities (H. Thompson 2009).

William Thompson explains:

These women may drive Volvos with "Keep Abortion Legal" bumper stickers during the week, and might file a sexual harassment charge against a co-worker for telling a sexist joke or for passing along an off-color e-mail, but they seem to have no problem tipping the bikini-clad beer girls, or cheering on contestants in the wet t-shirt contest at a bike rally. Like their male counterparts, these apparent "posers" go a step further, fully adopting their pseudo-deviant role, if only temporarily. (2009:104)

However, there are an increasing number of women who own and ride their own bikes, embodying more than an objectified extension of a purely masculine motorcycling community (Moon, 2006), though the number of female motorcyclists has always been and still are relatively small compared to that of male riders (Pierson, 1997). Terry Box (2007) reported several interesting statistics: In 1998, roughly 9% of the roughly 5.7 million motorcyclists were women. In 2003, roughly 10% of the 6.6 million riders were women, and, as of 2007, it is projected that women comprise nearly 12% of the riding population. Yet, as Roby Page (2005) explains in *Bike Week at Daytona Beach*, the media image of today's new biker subculture is still a largely male-dominated and macho portrayal despite the growing proportion of female riders.

Despite the disproportionately masculine media portrayals, women do periodically find their way into the public eye. Female riding clubs and organizations are occasionally written about as human interest pieces and as chronicles of women's financial and personal independence (Garber 2002). The Motor Maids organization, which still continues today, is an all-female riding club originally founded in 1938 for the purpose of providing camaraderie for women riders and to alter public perceptions that female motorcycle riders were man-hating lesbians (Motor Maids, Inc. History 1981). The very creation of the organization demonstrates the existence and value of symbolic appropriation within motorcycle culture. Women engaged in early motorcycle culture were so frequently demonized as man-hating lesbians that some of those women developed a riding organization to intentionally change the public image of female riders (Garber 2002; Motor Maids, Inc. History 1981). Effectively, those women were attempting to publicly appropriate the motorcycle as a gender neutral symbol, and to positively impact motorcycle culture and history through their collective campaign.

Women have always been a vital part of motorcycle culture, though their participation and achievements as a whole have been largely downplayed or ignored, if not met with outright aggression. However, as previously mentioned, due in part to civil and women's rights movements (resulting in increased comparative economic and social power, and the abolishment of previously widespread Victorian ideals of domesticity and subservience) women have increased in numbers, proportion, and prominence within the motorcycling community. Similarly, thanks in part to the changing perceptions of white-collar and middle-class Americans who increasingly view motorcycling as an acceptable pastime, a greater number of men and women from a broader array of economic, racial, and political backgrounds are now able to participate in motorcycling. And, thanks to more reliable and affordable technologies developed over the past 30 years, motorcycling



is an option for both male and female would-be-riders who are too mechanically inexperienced or uninterested in the constant maintenance and upkeep of earlier motorcycle designs.

All of these factors combine to result in a dramatically diversified motorcycling community, prompting hopes for a continuing increase in the media's portrayal of the riding community as more than the cliché and one-dimensional grizzly-faced, leather-clad, hyper-masculine motorcyclists of *Life* magazine. Hopefully, these new portrayals will more accurately represent the record-setting levels of cultural variation now present amongst American riders – including race, class, and gender. However, as a result of the cultural differentiation arising from competing symbolic appropriations of the motorcycle, it is difficult to identify what the new face of motorcycling is. As technological developments, both on and off the bikes, continue to increase the frequency and ease of access to motorcycle culture, symbolic interpretations of motorcycles and their multitude of manifestations continue to be contested to a greater degree. Motorcycle culture is a temporal and physical space rife with symbolic value, and the multitude of conflicting cultural interpretations provides individuals ample opportunities to appropriate often contested cultural symbols to serve the individual's purpose in self-identification as a motorcyclist and a member of motorcycle culture. Effectively, the abundance of contested symbols within motorcycle culture become tools for individuals to define themselves.

## Chapter 3

### Symbiosis and Style: Motorcycles and Identity

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is nothing inherently masculine or feminine regarding motorcycles. Rather, the socio-historical context of technological developments like motorcycles primarily influences how those technologies are socially situated. Kelkar and Nathan state that "[i]t is not technology itself that has inevitable consequences, but the economic and social situation in which technologies are introduced, and the balance of forces at any time" (2002:434). This is especially true for motorcycle riders, and the resulting culture that arises. Obviously, motorcycle culture revolves around motorcycles, so one could easily assume that changes in motorcycle technologies would affect the cultural landscape, as the previous chapter explores. However, it is not only changes in the technology of motorcycles themselves that alter motorcycle culture. Inventions such as cell phones, Global Positioning Systems, and even the Internet have all drastically modified the lives and lifestyles of motorcycle riders.

This chapter investigates how technological developments, both within and beyond the motorcycles themselves, have changed the way riders interact with their machines, each other, and the world around them. The first section begins by framing the act of motorcycling as a balancing of forces, an event that is not complete without the rider and the machine working in tandem. Understanding this relationship leads to the notion that being a motorcyclist is an activity of affective experience and identity creation, rather than a static label merely applied to motorcycle owners. Being a motorcyclist can then be seen as an activity that extends well beyond the motorcycle itself, or the roads and trails on which they are ridden. This chapter addresses technological and aesthetic selection as both a means and manifestation of identity creation and cultural expression,

thereby furthering the notion that motorcycles and their related technologies can and do serve as extensions of one's cultural self.

#### Human-Machine Interface

Obviously, motorcycles are machines, but they do not complete their purpose as a static piece of technology sitting parked. Motorcycles are a combination of the technological developments and manufactured components functioning in conjunction with a rider in motion (Pierson 1997). This is most evident when considering the very design of the machines: a motorcycle will not even remain standing at rest without stabilization from a rider or kickstand. Motorcycles are designed to be in motion, and require a rider to do such. Therefore, I assert that motorcycles epitomize the concept of a Human-Machine Interface: that neither motorcycle nor rider is complete without the other, but that neither is solely responsible for the act of motorcycling.

Motorcycling is often described in emotive terms of freedom and exhilaration, culminating in a sense of the rider and machine become a singular entity (Maynard 2008; Pierson 1997; Pirsig 1974). This romanticized anthropomorphic metaphor is an exaggeration because there is never any question of who is piloting the human-machine interface, only that the motorcycle's design influences the rider's behaviors and decisions. According to this perspective, motorcycling is a state of being accomplished by a rider in conjunction with a machine that serves as a means and method to sensory experience. Maynard clearly illustrates this point by explaining that "[a]fter a ride, the motorcyclist dismounts, breaking the illusion of the cybernetic melding of flesh and steel and reinstating the great dualist oppositions of human and machine, mind and body, and emotions and rationality" (2008:11). However, Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects* (1994) explains that if we critically examine how technology modulates and optimizes the social world, then the notion of a unitary body formed between technology and user becomes

only an idea, one that is formed through relations with other bodies that allow for their representation as a singularity.

The apparent union between motorcycle and rider is only formed in relation to other bodies, non-motorcycles and non-riders, and exists as a form of exclusionary discourse from the surrounding world. The act of riding a motorcycle is perceived as a singular state between the rider and the ridden, which results in the melding of the machine and the rider into one entity involved in one act. This symbolic merging of human operator and machine lays the temporal foundation for individuals to view the machine as an extension of themselves. If an individual identifies as a motorcyclist, they must, therefore, incorporate the motorcycle in their self-image. However, a rider's self-image as a motorcyclist is not entirely manifested or expressed by the person and the machine, but in the union of the two in the act of riding.

#### *Identity in Affective Experience*

Motorcycling is not limited to a single process, nor is it limited to the idea of unity between human and machine. In *Logic of Sense* (1990), Gilles Deleuze explains that a moment is an "...entity infinitely divisible into past and future... [in the] living present in bodies which act and are acted upon" (1990:4). Motorcycling, in this light, is a process of becoming, producing, and assembling affective bonds between action, idea, and technology in order to form an encompassing identity for all aspects involved. Identity is necessarily dependent on material interactions, since an individual can only find fulfillment through relationships with other beings or individuals, whether mechanical or organic (Hayles 1997; Maffesoli 1996). Therefore, identifying one's self as a motorcyclist is an exclusionary act, in that it serves to differentiate from all non-motorcyclists.

Deleuze and Guattari claim that humans and the natural world are not two opposing forces: causation, ideation, or expression cyclically arise from the essential

producer-product relationship (1977). Humans create technology, and technology reciprocally influences the human experience. Specifically, the act of motorcycling elicits from the rider physical and temporal responses that are “irreducible to cultural disposition or self-reflexive deconstruction” (Maynard 2008:12). It is from deeply personal experiences that individuals develop bonds with the affective experience of riding a motorcycle. John Law (2002), when exploring the decentering of objects in technoscience, explains that these bonds then serve as the foundation for solidarity amongst human agents, and between human agents and mechanical entities. Riding a motorcycle both excludes the rider from non-riders and non-motorcycles, yet provides a sense of solidarity between the motorcycle and other motorcyclists through the shared affective experience. Perhaps the contradictions between riders’ reported desires for independence and group participation stem from this simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion, which is at the very root of the affective experience of riding.

Maynard explains that an individual can experience excess speeds in a car and can smell fresh cut grass while riding a lawnmower, but when a rider is motorcycling, both the experience of speed and the smell of grass are combined in a way that is unique, but exceedingly difficult to explain (2008). Pirsig attempts to capture the distinctive nature of motorcycling by explaining that riding in a car is a comparatively mediated experience, one in which the world passing by on the other side of the glass, affectively similar to watching television as opposed to living the experience (1974). The act of riding a motorcycle stands in stark contrast to the distance and exclusion produced when enclosed in a glass and metal frame, precisely because there is a sense of unity with that beyond the bike itself. Yet again, the simultaneous process of exclusion (motorcyclist as separate from non-motorcyclists) and inclusion (motorcycling as a closer union with the outside world when compared to the riding in a car) that results in great

difficulty when attempting to explain the experience of motorcycling. The linguistic methods used to describe the differing sensations of riding a motorcycle compared to that of riding in a car with the windows down fall short of encapsulating the affective differences. Maynard succinctly explains that "...the affective event lived in the physical world is dependent on the machine used to facilitate the experience" (2008:12), and it is with this knowledge that the non-rider must trust that the experiences are vastly different despite the apparent similarities. However, it is not wrong of non-riders to desire an explanation, nor is it a fault of riders for their inability to provide one. It is precisely because of the inability of language to effectively replicate physical sensation and affective experience that the differences between motorcycling and other activities serve as a medium for continued social and symbolic interaction in attempts to explore such stimulus (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993).

To continue exploring this difficulty, consider that motorcyclists and bicyclists enjoy similar stimuli due to obvious similarities in design and activity, but the intensities of riding a motorcycle and a bicycle are drastically different because of the characteristics of the machines. The flows of energy and affective experiences impacting the rider are differentiated by their content (sensations) and expression (emotions), but are not reducible to them (Deleuze and Guattari 1997). While language can contend with descriptions of the differences in affective experience, language cannot replace actual experience as a means of understanding the impact of those differences. It is my belief that language, despite the level of eloquence and clarity, will never be able to capture the affective differences that make motorcycling unique from any other form of transportation.

Language attempts to transform these experiences and expressions into capturable life potential that can be shared with others, which then become interpersonal intensities (Massumi 2001), but language fails to grasp the abundance of sensations and

emotions contained in the act of riding. Talking about motorcycling cannot replace the experience of motorcycling, so once again the act of motorcycling is exclusionary, separating those that understand from those that don't. Therefore, the abundance of affective experiences related to motorcycling provide a foundation for identifying oneself in the social realm as a motorcyclist, precisely because of the experience and understanding of those sensations and emotions, regardless of any linguistic capacity to share that experience with another. It is in the absence of the ability of language to convey these affective experiences, that riders employ symbols to express their comprehension of the experience and, therefore, their validity as a participant in motorcycle culture.

Riders use an array of motorcycle-related cultural artifacts (e.g. motorcycles, helmets, t-shirts, tattoos, vests, patches, etc.) to develop and defend the validity of their membership in the motorcycling community, and their cultural alignment within motorcycle culture. The use of symbols to express the validity of their cultural membership, and their location within the temporal realm of motorcycle culture, is a form of both inclusionary and exclusionary discourse. For example, wearing a Harley-Davidson t-shirt from Sturgis (a very large annual motorcycle rally centered on American motorcycles) implies to others that the individual wearing it understands and appreciates not only Sturgis and Harley-Davidsons, but all that they symbolize. Wearing such a shirt is inclusive in the sense that it prompts conversations with others that are in-the-know or who want to be. But, publicly displaying cultural symbols on a t-shirt is simultaneously exclusionary because it immediately forms an other or an out-group: those who don't know the symbols and their meanings, or those who know the symbols but have appropriated their symbolic value differently. When an individual appropriates the symbolic value of Harley-Davidson and Sturgis to express some specific meaning, they

are indicating their temporal location within the symbolic realm of motorcycle culture. By doing so, that individual is expressing his or her self-identification with some sect of motorcycle culture that shares similar symbolic interpretations. And, because of the very relationship between self and other, self-identification with a specific sect of motorcycle culture inherently involves declaring separation or distinction from another individual or group.

As motorcyclists come together to engage in cultural exchange, they employ language and symbolic appropriation to explore motorcycles and their related affective experiences, and to explore their roles as motorcyclists. Therefore, individuals involved in such a cultural exchange are in a continual state of becoming motorcyclists (Maynard 2008). This perpetual state of becoming occurs on both the individual level, as one further explores their own identity as a motorcyclist, but also on a social level, as motorcycle culture arises as a result of the collective actions and interpretations of the individuals who comprise it. Riders use symbols and language to define themselves as motorcyclists, to declare membership in the motorcycling community, and to validate their membership by expressing an understanding of the affective experience of riding.

#### *Affective Experience as Cultural Capital*

Motorcycling culture may be distinguished from other cultures not only because of the particular affections motorcycling may evoke, but because of the cultural qualities and symbolic value attributed to the cultural exchange surrounding the affective experience of riding. In my experience, riders do not attempt to linguistically capture the experience of motorcycling or being a motorcyclist, because it is generally believed to be a futile endeavor. Rather, they use relatively subjective words and phrases like “cool,” “awesome,” “white-knuckled,” “laid-back,” and the very common, “you know, you ride.”



Renowned long-distance rider and author of *Against the Wind*, Ron Ayers, expresses a similar feeling of frustration with words for their failure to capture the experience of riding:

For my last evening of the trip, I found a good spot to pull to the side of the road for some star-gazing. I recalled Hank Rowland's after-dinner comments to the group about wishing he was a poet so that he could describe how he felt. I knew exactly what he meant. (1997:192)

Many motorcyclists can relate, myself included, having spent evenings winding down country roads, perhaps stopping to gaze at the stars above. Yet, due to the failures of language to capture affective experience, it is impossible to communicate these feelings to those who have never had such experiences. One might legitimately question what makes the affective quality of these motorcycling events any different than if one had driven in a car or gone out for a walk: the difference is one of affective experience. Despite the paradoxical nature of understanding only through understanding, the affective experience cannot be understood without participation and experience. Personal reactions to the experience of riding a motorcycle are likely socialized to some degree – riders are supposed to feel “free” and “independent.” However, this section explores the ways in which the affective experience itself is used as cultural capital in an effort to illustrate the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive nature of riding.

Taking a motorcycle ride on a summer night both extends and constrains perceptions of the affective event, providing an entirely different series of sensations than if a rider were driving a car or walking. The differences are multi-faceted, but let it suffice to say that the rider feels more ‘in tune’ with their surroundings. This logic constructs the experience of motorcycling as something that unites rather than frees a rider from interconnectedness and interdependence with other entities. This sense of unification becomes a source of internal cultural capital precisely because it is within the framework of experience and exchange “...that passion is expressed, common beliefs are

developed and the search for 'those who feel and think as we do' takes place" (Maffesoli 1996:13), even on a lonely summer night. In this way, even a solitary ride becomes an act of solidarity with the riding community because of the knowledge that there are those who understand and share the rider's passions, thereby ascribing the act with distinct cultural significance. The act of motorcycling, even when performed alone, becomes a symbolic provision of culturally shared affective experience materialized (Urry 2004); it becomes a social act.

Post-industrial life in North America often constrains people to the activities of daily living, and limits their ability to form social relationships with others, amongst motorcyclists there as a sense that one can find comfort, familiarity, and identity with people who have shared this experience. Such a point also supports the idea that individuals can confidently rely on at least superficial relationships with others within the motorcycling community (McDonald-Walker 2000): motorcyclists can always talk about rides or bikes, even if they have little else in common. There is also the understanding that community is not synonymous with commonality, and "...that a group does not need to be a monolithic mass to experience a feeling of solidarity and collective identity" (McDonald-Walker 2000:53). Self-identification as a motorcyclist does not necessitate cultural assimilation. Rather, individuals are granted to opportunity to become part of a group, simply by riding and talking with others who ride, while still maintaining a degree of individuality that suits their needs.

While there is no doubt that motorcycle culture influences the choices and decisions of the individuals that comprise it, the individual motorcyclists' identities also impact the culture as a whole because, in day-to-day interactions, those individuals represent the motorcycling community and motorcycle culture. In addition to socio-historical events and top-down theories of cultural forces, individuals also shape culture –

as cells influence and shape an organism – because they are situated within a greater history of events that constitute a community network, built up from exchange between individuals (Maffesoli 1996). The cyclical relationship between individual and community in motorcycle culture can be understood by considering that culture structures riders' identities by providing cultural symbols and stereotypes for riders to self-identify with or against, while those same cultural symbols and stereotypes are then appropriated, in turn, by individual of motorcyclists.

Despite this amorphic depiction of symbolic diffusion within motorcycle culture, riders typically share the understanding that motorcyclists will always have at least something in common, or a subject for discussion. Yet, now more than ever, there may be no bond beyond this superficial cultural foundation of shared affective experience within motorcycle culture (McDonald-Walker 2000), but simply having the affective experience of riding becomes cultural capital for a individual to validate their participation in motorcycle culture, despite the levels of similarity or variability among riders. The relatively easy entry into motorcycle culture, the simple act of riding, results in levels of cultural differentiation and diffusion that fail to provide individuals with specific mandates of what it is to be a motorcyclist. Therefore, riders engage in symbolic appropriation in a process of self-identification as a motorcyclist.

#### Identity and Choice

Identity, and the corresponding sense of self, are pivotal to the decision making process. Motorcyclists are presented a multitude of symbols and symbolic interpretations to enlist in the process of identity construction. Riders engage in symbolic appropriation when selecting which technological and aesthetic goods they will incorporate in their self-image, and how implementing the varying technological developments fits within their perceptions of self and the community at large. The reflective activity of symbolic

interpretation and appropriation will be discussed in greater detail later, but for now it suffices to discuss how choice, regarding the implementation of technological developments and aesthetics, results in cultural expression and differentiation.

#### *Bike Selection and Cultural Expression*

The 59 Club started as a youth riding club in London by Reverend John Oates in 1959 (Barger, Zimmerman and Zimmerman 2000). Several years later, being a motorcyclist himself, Father William Shergold (a.k.a. Father Bill) decided to start a church service especially for motorcyclists. After the club moved with Father Bill to a different location in North-West London, the club eventually gained enough prominence that the press began to regularly acknowledge them. The club was known as a gang of rockers and hooligans (leather-clad and rambunctious adolescents and young adults), who were the antithesis to mods (suit-wearing, scooter-riding adolescents and young adults) (McDonald-Walker 2000). Their notoriety as a formal organization of speed-demons arose because the 59ers of that time rode the newest, fastest, most highly modified bikes they could get their greasy hands on. These bikes were known as café racers because they were quite literally race bikes, but were used primarily on public streets to race from café to café, rather than on motorcycle tracks specifically designed such activities (Pierson 1997).

Despite the club's early association with the most technologically advanced motorcycles of the time, through the years of technological development, the group has transformed into the largest vintage motorcycle club in the world, which now primarily consists of middle-aged motorcycle enthusiasts riding vintage café racer motorcycles (Page 2005). Though the club is still open to modern sport bike riders, especially those produced by European manufacturers, it has become an iconic symbol of the vintage café racer scene.

The 59 Club's transformational shift in focus from contemporary bikes (contemporary for the time) to vintage bikes (as those once contemporary bikes have become) clearly demonstrates the symbolic value of motorcycles and motorcycle related symbols. The process of identifying one's self with the 59 Club has changed from aligning with the new and renegade to the classic and vintage, as the identities of the original riders have shifted in accordance with age and nostalgia. This shift in symbolic alignment occurs as new and original members experience a shift in socio-historical context, and the contextual shifts result in changing symbolic interpretations. Given the changing symbolic value surrounding the motorcycles and aesthetic choices of 59 Club riders – once symbolizing the new but now symbolizing the old – one can understand how the symbolic value of cultural artifacts shifts over time. These changes in socio-historical context and symbolic interpretation directly influence which motorcycles and motorcycle subcultures a rider chooses to identify with.

Although, despite the popularity of café racers and their distinction as a sect of motorcycle culture, nothing symbolizes American motorcycle culture more than the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, just as Watson claimed about outlaw motorcyclists (1980).

William Thompson details an interview with one of his research subjects:

The author encountered one biker who was looking longingly at the new models at a Honda dealership. The man said, "I've ridden Hondas since the 1960 s and absolutely love 'em—best bike ever made—but I finally broke down this summer and bought a Harley." When asked why, he ducked his head and confessed, "Peer pressure—all my buddies ride Harleys, and we formed a little club and they made it part of the by-laws that we've gotta ride a Harley to be a member." Then, he quickly added, "But hey, we still like all the brothers who ride and anybody can ride any kind of bike with us, they just can't wear our colors." (2009:100)

Though Harley Davidson is known and recognized throughout most of the world, the symbolic dominance of Harleys is primarily an American phenomenon. Outlaw motorcycle clubs in the United States have long been associated with American and

British made motorcycles (e.g. Indian, Triumph, Norton, BSA), but none have become so iconic to the American mass media as the Harley Davidson (Shamblin 1971; W. Thompson 1967; Webb 1994).

The association between outlaw clubs and Harleys within America is, at least in part, due to the fact that military surplus Harleys were plentiful, accessible and affordable within the United States after World War II (Webb 1994). The emergence of symbolic value emerging from cultural circumstances demonstrates that technology is situated within a socio-cultural context. The association of Harleys with outlaws as a distinctly American cultural phenomenon is illustrated by the fact that nearly all Australian outlaw motorcycle clubs – practically identical to American outlaw clubs in every other aspect of appearance, behavior, and media portrayal – are primarily associated with Japanese made sport bikes like the Kawasaki KZ1000R because the Japanese bikes are more readily accessible, and parts are much more plentiful and less expensive (Webb 1994).

When comparing American and Australian outlaw motorcycle clubs, one finds that both groups share nearly all cultural attributes, despite the fact that their technological choice of which motorcycle to ride is extremely different (Moon 2006). An abundance of tattoos, leather clothing and gear, earrings, and facial hair signify the self-appointed position of outlaw motorcyclists as outside of the constraints of normal or mainstream society – but the socio-cultural contexts surrounding these self-marginalized clubs result in different interpretations of the symbolic value of the motorcycles themselves. So, while these clubs are identical in many ways, an Australian club member would not be allowed to ride with an American club formation (a group of riders riding as a single unit in close proximity) because the Australian member would almost certainly be riding a Japanese made motorcycle: an offense strictly forbidden by American outlaw clubs (H. Thompson 1967).

The seemingly interdependent nature of culture and cultural artifacts is deceptive. Outlaws do not entirely owe their cultural identity to their appropriation of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, nor has the symbolic value of Harley-Davidson motorcycles been entirely appropriated by outlaw clubs. There is a distinct relationship between the two, arising from socio-historical context, but that relationship is one of stylistic choice as opposed to cultural necessity.

### *Aesthetics and Style*

Changing or contested symbolic interpretation of cultural artifacts within motorcycle culture is not limited to the 59 Club or outlaw motorcycle clubs. In fact, it permeates the entire sub-culture of motorcycle riders (Joans 2001). A vibrant example of such differing symbolic interpretations occurs regarding the aesthetic appeal of various forms of armor and riding gear. While most outlaws and more traditional bikers choose either plain black or brown leather for the majority of their riding equipment (e.g. chaps, vests, jackets, boots, gloves, etc.), riders of modern sport bikes regularly choose protective gear featuring prominently placed bright colors and flamboyant neon accents (e.g. mohawks attached to the tops of helmets). Gregory Frazier, in *Motorcycle Touring* (2005), comments that the aforementioned accoutrements are often color-coordinated with the paint jobs of contemporary sport bikers' motorcycles. This is not to say that outlaws and more traditional bikers lack colorful displays altogether, since they often don colors associated with their clubs or riding groups: red and white for Hell's Angels; red and gold for Bandidos; black and white for Mongols; green and white for Boozefighters, etc. Interestingly, outlaws and bikers commonly refer to their patch-laden vest as their 'colors,' which expresses affiliations and accomplishments both in and out of their club (H. Thompson 1967).

The associations between aesthetics and personal expression are also reflected in differing riding styles. The rough and grizzly appearance of outlaws and more traditional bikers reflects the regularly negative interpretation of outlaws' and bikers' activities outside of motorcycling. But, the typically dulled and rough appearance of outlaw riders and more traditional bikers may also reflect their riding styles that arise from stylistic choices. Though outlaws and bikers are not known for riding slowly or without aggression, their riding habits are heavily influenced by the technological limitations of the rudimentary suspensions and carburetors typical of cruiser and chopper motorcycle designs. In appropriating specific types of motorcycles and motorcycle related artifacts, outlaws and bikers have forced themselves to adopt riding characteristics that emerge from the limitations of their choices regarding motorcycle technology.

The in-your-face presentation of many contemporary sport bike riders is a mirroring of the bright and flashy designs of most contemporary sport bikes. The aesthetic designs and the technological developments incorporated in the mechanical design of contemporary sport bikes are both cutting edge, symbolically reflecting the newness of cutting edge technology and performance capabilities. The aggressive designs and displays of intensity also represent sport bike riders' tendencies to ride in an aggressive and excessively dangerous manner, regularly putting both themselves and others in serious danger (Frazier 2005). These riders are often complained about for their reckless and irresponsible riding habits: frequently performing wheelies (standing the bike up vertically on the rear wheel by accelerating quickly) and stoppies (standing the bike up vertically on the front wheel by braking quickly) in traffic, and barreling down the freeway while weaving through cars doing speeds in excess of 120 miles per hour (Moon 2006). While many outlaws and bikers also ride aggressively, it is actually the



design of contemporary sport bikes that allows the distinctively aggressive and dangerous riding behaviors of contemporary sport bike riders.

Though modern sport bikes and their riders are allowed, members of the 59 Club still predominantly identify with aesthetic and technological choices appropriate to the club's origination. Davida helmets, pilot's goggles, and patch-laden studded jackets still reign supreme as indicators of one's self-identification with the daredevil, street-racing hooligans that started the club. These aesthetic choices demonstrate an alliance with the figures that emerged in that socio-historical context, but the related technological associations uncover another interesting relationship. Lowered handlebars, in stark contrast to the mid-level handlebars of touring bikes or the high "ape hangers" typical of cruisers and choppers, and rear-set foot controls, which provide a more aggressive riding posture, allow riders of these vintage motorcycles to push the bike far beyond the limits of comparable cruisers and choppers. In fact, the technological developments resulting from the café racer movement are largely responsible for the development of contemporary sport bikes, as sport bikes emerged from manufacturer's decisions to incorporate these design elements. Yet, despite the obvious relationship between contemporary sport bikes and vintage café racers, the symbolic appropriation and cultural alignment with these earlier carbureted motorcycles signifies an inherent distinction between the two sects of motorcycle culture.

#### *Cultural Stereotypes and Cliques*

Without continued study, it would be naïve to claim generalizability of the aforementioned observations and assertions about style, but trends in technological and aesthetic selection and presentation – style – are perceived by members of the riding community as fairly consistent indicators of self-identification within the cultural context. Stereotypes relating to technological and aesthetic selection have come to serve as a

means of capturing the related cultural orientations, and allow motorcyclists to discuss individual selection trends on a cultural scale, lumping riders into groups based on the shared meanings, values, and motivations of its members.

The following are a few of the more prominent stereotypical rider manifestations I have witness in my experience as a member of the motorcycling community:

- 1) Outlaws (or one-percenters): as depicted in *Life* magazine and regularly doted on by the mass media in many popular movies and television programs, such as Walt Becker's *Wild Hogs* (2007), Larry Bishop's *Hell Ride* (2008), History Channel's *Gangland* (2007), and Kurt Sutter's *Sons of Anarchy* (2008).
- 2) Bikers: often confused with outlaws, but without club affiliations. They are typically identified as less radical and violent. Hippie-bikers, as a specific type of biker, are portrayed in Dennis Hopper's film *Easy Rider* (1969).
- 3) RUBs (an acronym that is short for rich urban bikers): portrayed by the protagonists in Walt Becker's *Wild Hogs* (2007), starkly contrasted to outlaws in the film.
- 4) SQUIDs (an amalgamation of the phrase 'squirrely kids'): typified by the reckless speed-demon on a late-model sport bike; portrayed in Reggie Bythewood's 2003 film, *Biker Boyz*.
- 5) Café racers: basically a vintage version of SQUIDs. These riders are prominently feature in Discovery Channel's television series *Café Racer TV* – in which one of my motorcycles and myself were featured.

While many more cultural stereotypes exist, especially as subsets within each of these groups, the stereotypes listed suffice to show that individuals within the motorcycling community sub-categorize one another based on their cultural orientations.

The process of differentiation – distinguishing between the varying sub-cultures within the motorcycling community – is largely dependent on technological and aesthetic selection as a means of symbolic appropriation in identity construction.

The multitude of stereotypes within the motorcycling community exemplify the strong associations between motorcycle selection, personal attire, riding style, and cultural orientations: Café racers harken back to the glory days of British sport bike clubs racing around the streets of London (McDonald-Walker 2000). SQUIDs often don mohawks and neon lights, exemplifying their taste for that which is new, intense, and in-your-face (Kieffner 2009). Many RUBs choose billet and chrome accessories and patches with cheeky catch-phrases, incorporating pseudo-deviant behaviors in their spare time between career and family obligations (W. Thompson 2009). Most traditional bikers and outlaws tend toward a drab look of leather adorned with club colors rooted in their militaristic beginnings (Osgerby 2005).

While the drastic differences in symbolic appropriation are especially apparent when comparing SQUIDs to bikers, or café racers to outlaws, all of the aforementioned groups remain strikingly similar when considering the way in which they appropriate symbols in the process of identity construction. However, the degree to which members align themselves with specific cultural artifacts and symbols, and what cultural artifacts and symbols they choose, varies wildly. Yet, the process of symbolic appropriation is an inherent part of membership in motorcycle culture: all riders, to some degree or less, engage in the appropriation of cultural symbols and artifacts when identifying themselves with the interpersonal and physical act of being a motorcyclist (Page 2005).

The distinctions between riding groups seem strong at first glance, given some of the obvious differences in overt symbolic presentation, but the perception of these differences becomes blurred as one compares groups that lie closer to one-another

across the spectrum of motorcyclists, or when one begins to question the homogeneity of members within any sect. I have met sport bike riders with outlaw perspectives, has shared in philosophically rewarding discussions with outlaw club members about the nuances of identity construction, and has been in physical altercations with hyper-aggressive RUBs. Based on my personal experiences, not limited to those mentioned above, I am confident that differentiated trends in symbolic appropriation do not necessitate homogenous behavioral characteristics among those with shared interpretations. However, the relationship between stylistic choices and cultural characteristics remains, implying that a rider's interpretation, appropriation, and display of cultural symbols is a necessary function in identity creation and self-expression within motorcycle culture.

It is important to note that the process of cultural exchange within motorcycle culture is no longer limited to the geospatial realm, as discussed in this chapter. Communication technologies allow individuals to extend the process of cultural participation and cultural exchange well beyond the limitations of face-to-face interactions. Therefore, the temporal process of identity creation and self-expression through symbolic appropriation is venturing into new arenas beyond the physical realm of cultural exchange. Attitudes, behaviors, assumptions and jargon in verbal, written, and visual forms of communication also symbolize individuals' choices in self-identification and symbolic appropriation. Motorcycle culture is not simply incorporating these new means of communication to extend the previously existing process of cultural exchange into the new digital platform, but is also experiencing profound changes as a result.

## Chapter 4

### Beyond the Bike: the Role of Communication Technology in Motorcycle Culture

Newly developed communication technologies, both on and off the road, have profoundly influenced motorcycling culture. They allow individuals lacking mechanical inclinations, or those without a disposition for long periods of solitude and introspection, to find remedies for the previously limiting conditions of motorcycling, so they too can take part in motorcycle culture. Recently developed communication technologies also allow greater access to the motorcycling community, especially for those individuals who aspire to gain entry, by providing opportunities for interactions well-beyond the previously limiting geospatial and cultural limitations of the past. The adaptation and implementation of communication technologies also provides yet another battleground for the various sects of the motorcycling community to differentiate themselves, and for aspiring cultural participants to appropriate symbols in the process of self-identifying as participants in motorcycle culture.

### Chatter Underway

Today, a historically unprecedented number of motorcycle riders are members of AAA or have motorcycle insurance policies that provide 24-hour roadside assistance and towing services (Frazier 2005). With the advent of modern mobile communication technologies, and the resulting interconnectedness made possible through these recent developments in technology, motorcycle culture is experiencing dynamic changes in who rides and what it means to ride (Pierson 1997).

Before the age of cell phones and Global Positioning Systems, riders were required, through circumstance, to be fairly self-reliant because there was no guarantee that the rider would be able to contact anyone if something happened on the road (H. Thompson 1967). This was especially true on long road trips or cross-country endeavors,

and when traveling through regions where motorcycle riders were not welcomed with open arms: think again of the long haired hippie-bikers of the 1970's riding through the Deep South in *Easy Rider*. For reasons such as these, as well as others less directly related to technology, motorcycle riders formed strong bonds through clubs and affiliations in order to combat the vulnerability of motorcycle travel (Webb 1994). These bonds are often referred to as the 'brotherhood' of motorcycle riders. But today, "[m]ost riders carry cell phones, and thus, brotherhood or not, help is never far away" (W. Thompson 2009:97). The brotherhood and biker code, born of necessity, have dissolved into a more superficial form: one that is discussed and waved around as a banner of camaraderie, but is rarely enacted.

Riders often employ the so-call 'biker wave,' an inverted peace-sign casually thrown below the left handlebar when passing another motorcyclist on the road, to insinuate the continued existence of the brotherhood amongst motorcyclists. However, I have repeatedly watched multiple motorcyclists drive by while I worked to generate a temporary fix on the side of the road, some of whom even had the audacity throw the biker wave while passing by. This is not to say that all motorcyclists have abandoned the code, as motorcyclists have stopped on several occasions, but to illustrate that adherence to the biker code is not a universal characteristic of contemporary motorcyclists. Lacking adherence to the code signifies the dissolution of any apparently monolithic community within motorcycle culture, or supports the claim that such uniformity never existed.

Perhaps my experiences indicate that the code itself has morphed in response to technological developments, from a necessity for continued survival as motorcyclists to a remnant bit of conceptual nostalgia. It is not outlandish or extreme for contemporary motorcyclist passerby's to assume that stranded riders have a phone, but the symbolic

act of stopping to assist ceases when those assumptions are acted upon. When a rider chooses not to stop, for whatever reason, the symbolic brotherhood that stopping symbolizes is degraded. In any case, the possibility exists that the brotherhood, the biker code, and the biker wave are cultural manifestations of revisionist history. It is possible, and perhaps quite likely, that the alleged unity among bikers never existed. If that is the case, these cultural manifestations of revisionist history exist as symbols appropriated by individuals attempting to align themselves with a fictitious and idealized age of motorcycling's by-gone days.

Regardless of the aforementioned assertions, the reality for contemporary riders is, due to the implementation of newly developed communication technologies, much of the danger once associated with riding motorcycles is largely reduced. Most riders are nothing more than a phone call away from help, a security blanket of sorts that allows for people with less risk-taking tendencies to enjoy the act of riding without stepping too far out of their comfort zone (Frazier 2005). Due to the newfound security and protection provided by cell phones and Global Positioning Systems, the act of riding motorcycles is more safely accessible to a larger population of riders than ever before. The resultant increase in safety provides opportunities for riders with lower risk tolerances to take part, thereby increasing and diversifying the motorcycling population.

Things like the Chatterbox (a two-way radio system installed in a riders' helmets) also impact motorcycle culture because they minimize the isolation formerly associated with riding. In-helmet audio systems allow riders to listen to music and to chat with others through radio or Bluetooth connections while riding. Without these technologies, riders are limited to the sounds of the road, motor, and wind for auditory stimulus, and are dependent on hand signals and formation behaviors as the only forms of communication while riding (H. Thompson 1967). Now, riders that are uncomfortable with long periods of

quite introspection and the inherent isolation of riding are more readily able to enjoy their favorite music or engage in conversations while riding. This also allows a larger population to enjoy the act of riding motorcycles because it provides a wider range of activities while riding, thereby allowing the rider to modify their experience to suit personal preferences (Pierson 1997). Increasing control of the riding experience allows riders to further customize their affective experience to suit their ideal version of motorcycling, but the symbolic value of these choices is not uncontested.

Drastic differences exist between motorcycle subcultures regarding the implementation of communication technologies like the Chatterbox system and motorcycle-mounted stereo systems. Outlaw clubs almost uniformly prohibit the use of Chatterbox systems and listening to music or talking on the cell phone while riding. Outlaws typically view the social isolation and auditory monotony as an integral part of motorcycling. Instead of in-helmet communication systems, outlaws typically rely on 'throttle speak,' a form of communication that combines engine tones with hand and foot signals to orchestrate rider formation movements. The historical association between throttle speak and outlaw clubs is another example of symbolic appropriation: incorporating in-helmet communication devices would potentially cause the extinction of throttle speak, and abandoning their cultural heritage in such a way would be to relinquish their identity as traditional outlaw motorcyclists.

In contrast, SQUIDs often promote the use of these communication technologies. I have spoken with several SQUIDs who explained, generally speaking, that they view in-helmet connectivity an essential aid when engaged in illegal activities like organized street races, 'stunting,' or cruising in packs at speeds in excess of 120 miles per hour. They expressed that the connectivity provided by these communication systems is integral to the efficiency of early warning systems meant to notify riders of potential



threats, such as aggressive vigilante motorists and law enforcement activity. The communication systems also facilitate continued contact between riders when groups diverge, sometimes covering distances in excess of 100 miles, to evade police forces. They also explained that barreling down the freeway or through a section of corners while listening to their favorite tunes was invigorating. Given that SQUIDs pride themselves on riding the most technologically advanced motorcycles, their self-image as motorcyclists encourages the appropriation of the newest and best technological developments. Therefore, SQUIDs adopt technological developments beyond the motorcycles themselves because they easily identify the practical and entertainment applications, and the appropriation of those developments does not threaten their self-image.

#### Digitizing Affective Experience

New realms of interconnectedness while riding are not the only sources of change within motorcycle community. With the advent of handlebar-mounted digital video cameras, riders can come closer than ever to sharing their riding experiences with those who have never ridden motorcycles, or haven't ridden on the same roads and trails. Before audio-video components advanced to such a degree, allowing them to be manufactured small enough in order to be fitted to a motorcycle, the only way for someone to experience the process of leaning into corners and splitting lanes in traffic was to ride, either as the operator or a passenger. But, thanks to these camera systems, people can watch rider-recorded videos on phones, tablets, computers, and home theater systems. In doing so, those viewers come closer to riding a motorcycle than previously possible (Joans 2001).

Posting and sharing motorcycling videos has become fairly common on video-hosting websites like YouTube, and has become a reliable way for motorcyclists to discover new roads that are exceptionally fun for, and sought after by, motorcyclists

(Frazier 2005). The popularity of roads such as The Tail of the Dragon (US-129 on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina) and The Three Twisted Sisters (Ranch Roads 335, 336 and 337 in Texas Hill Country) has boomed largely because of such videos, and the ability to share these, and videos like them, over the Internet. The Tail of the Dragon has gained so much notoriety that it is not uncommon to see motorcycles or vests adorned with “Dragon 129” stickers and patches, symbolizing the honor and accomplishment of having ridden such a well-known road.

Increased video access to motorcycling not only increased the popularity of certain roads, but also gave rise to the prominence of Ghost Rider as a contested albeit eminent figure in motorcycle culture. As the personification of aggressive SQUID riding behaviors, Ghost Rider is an iconic figure who rose to fame on 200mph wheelies while engaged in a high-speed pursuit while wearing a helmet-mounted camera. Ghost Rider’s YouTube videos went viral as motorcyclists and non-motorcyclists alike were awed and outraged by his unworldly riding. The content of the videos – taunting police, time trials laps on congested freeway loops, and other displays of skillful but reckless riding – spurred ongoing debates between those who admired his skill and cunning, and those who despised the negative image of sport bike riders he perpetuated.

The Ghost Rider debate is not limited to that rider’s (or riders’) decisions to behave in such a dangerous way on public streets, which puts innocent people in harm’s way, but includes discussion about the actual identity of Ghost Rider. YouTube comments and motorcycle-specific online forums and chat rooms perpetuate a number of rumors about Ghost Rider’s identity: some think it was one person, but that other riders later appropriated the Ghost Rider image to boost their own notoriety; others think it was always a team of riders; some think the original Ghost Rider died or was imprisoned; while others believe that Ghost Rider is simply lying dormant, free and in good health.

The mythos surrounding Ghost Rider's feats and identity, resulting from YouTube video sharing, illustrates yet another example of symbolic appropriation. Even when excluding results associated with the Ghost Rider movie, hundreds of YouTube videos pop-up when someone searches "Ghost Rider Police," yet only a few are of the iconic Ghost Rider. The vast majority are parodies, others mimicking Ghost Rider's antics, or off-shoots and self-declared fans producing similar videos of their own.

One young rider American rider named Justin Jachimiec from the Chicago area was arrested as a result of creating his own Ghost Rider inspired helmet-camera videos for YouTube (Sullivan 2013). Jachimiec not only embodied the original Ghost Rider's reckless behaviors, though to a lesser degree of scale and frequency, he even posted videos under the name "Orland Ghost Rider." Orland Ghost Rider is a combination of Jachimiec's town name, Orland, and Ghost Rider's name. Combining the names in such a way is blatant evidence that Jachimiec, in the process of creating his identity as a motorcyclist, appropriated the Ghost Rider's name, image, and symbolic value.

Digitizing the affective experience of motorcycling has increased access to motorcycle culture for riders and non-riders alike. People who have never ridden a motorcycle can watch YouTube videos of unprecedented speeds and daredevil riding from the view of the rider's helmet. Previously obscure and remote roads are now regularly overrun with enthusiastic riders who don patches and stickers to symbolize their involvement and commitment to motorcycle culture. Would be riders, perhaps unable to acquire the necessary credentials or economic means to obtain a motorcycle of their own, while away hours drooling at the images and audio emanating from their computers. They learn the lingo, iconography, symbolism and cultural norms necessary to socially demonstrate their competency of motorcycle culture, possibly without having ever ridden a motorcycle. New means of telecommunication access to riding, and the wide array of

audience members soaking up the digitized experiences, are creating an online platform for cultural exchange. The act of being a motorcyclist is, in some ways, transferring from the throttle and road to the keyboard and modem.

#### Online Communities

As with almost every aspect of American culture, and as introduced with the discussion of the cultural impact of YouTube videos, the World Wide Web's influence on contemporary motorcycle culture is profound. Old fashioned gang fights and rumbles of the 1950s and 1960s have been replaced with Internet blogs, chat rooms and message boards, where Harley riders and riders of other brand motorcycles (especially Japanese v-twins) chide, disparage, and 'beat up' one another (Joans 2001, McDonald-Walker 2000). Through these message boards and chat rooms, members become acquainted, swap mechanical tips, discuss modifications and repairs for particular makes and models of motorcycles, announce upcoming rides, rallies and events, and buy and sell motorcycles and parts (W. Thompson, 2009), much of the same cultural exchange that previously occurred in bars and club houses. These digital platforms for cultural exchange provide new opportunities for riders and non-riders to socially engage others, creating a new realm for the maintenance and modification of motorcycle culture. These new online communities drastically increase opportunities for riders and potential riders to 'meet' and 'chat' with other riders in the online realm, furthering cultural exchange within the motorcycling community, and providing more frequent and varied opportunities to develop one's identity as a motorcyclist.

Additionally, the brotherhood of bikers manifests itself in new ways in this digital realm, as members post when fellow riders have been injured in accidents, had a bike stolen or damaged, or otherwise have suffered some personal hardship or tragedy. In cases such as the aforementioned, fellow riders commonly donate money and offer

tangible, spiritual, and social support for their “brethren” experiencing strife (W. Thompson, 2009:99), even though the “brethren” may live thousands of miles apart, and oftentimes have never met in person or heard each other’s voice. William Thompson goes on to explain that these message boards even experience a self-policing, similar to the biker code, when members feel that they have been cheated by a dealer, an online company, or fellow members of the board, often resulting in chastisement, boycotts, or banning continued membership (2009).

The cultural exchange taking place in online communities is no less culturally significant than face-to-face interactions. Riders appropriate symbols (e.g. jargon, images, technological and aesthetic preferences) in an effort to create their digital identity as a motorcyclist. And, as demonstrated by the Orland Ghost Rider, those identities have very real and profound effects on individuals’ lives beyond the internet. The online persona of motorcyclists, through posts, comments and stories, have real-world effects. Riders and non-riders that receive funds from online “brethren” receive real money. The primary difference is that non-riders are granted equal access to these digitized cultural exchanges, thereby mitigating the common face-to-face requirement that one be a motorcyclist to be a member of motorcycle culture.

#### The Expanding Boundaries of Motorcycle Culture

The socio-cultural context of technology simultaneously guides and is guided by the symbolic appropriation of technological developments. This is especially true in motorcycle culture, as discussed in the previous sections. The fundamental aspects of motorcycles remain the same: two wheels, frame, and an engine. However, cultural manifestations within motorcycle culture drastically differ. Cultural differentiation arises from the fact that individuals appropriate the symbols based on how those symbols align with the individual’s self-image, so the varying sects of the motorcyclists emerge from

varying individual symbolic interpretations and appropriations regarding the adoption or rejection of technological and aesthetic developments. Individuals then identify others with similar perspectives, and a sense of community and shared culture emerges.

For example, the replacement of carburetors with computer controlled fuel injectors potentially represents two very different things: the advancement of engine performance and efficiency, or the eventual extinction of garage mechanics. While the distinction between these two realistic and interdependent points is subtle, it has profound cultural effects because an individual rider is likely to identify more closely with one of the aforementioned perspectives. In identifying more closely with one or the other, that individual is appropriating the symbolic value and meaning of computer controlled fuel injection to align with his or her views and beliefs. That individual, in valuing one of the perspectives more than the other, has made a choice: motorcycles should readily be maintained by the rider, at the expense of performance; or, motorcycles should be as fast and efficient as possible, at the expense of the rider being able to maintain it. Making such a choice partially defines that individual's temporal location within motorcycle culture, with or without intention.

The computer controlled fuel injector example, despite the seemingly subtle distinction between perspectives, is far more obvious than the decision to incorporate a GPS system as a part of a motorcycle rig, yet both are strikingly similar. There is an old adage in motorcycle culture that claims you can never be lost on a motorcycle, you're simply riding around. Having a GPS system would limit opportunities to experience wandering around back roads in the middle of nowhere, an affective experience that some would consider a quintessential motorcycling experience. Therefore, whether in agreement or not, it's easy to understand why some motorcyclists would see a GPS

system as an indicator that the owner is not a 'real' motorcyclist, because he or she is not experiencing all it is to be a motorcyclist.

While fuel injection, in-helmet communication devices, and GPS systems have all played their part in drastically altering motorcycle culture, the most profound impact comes from online cultural exchange platforms like YouTube and forums. In unprecedented numbers, riders and non-riders are engaged in discourse about what it means to be a motorcyclist. These cultural actors are involved in an ongoing debate over the symbolic value motorcycles, motorcycle related technology, and what it means to be a motorcyclist, all of which involves appropriating symbols to align with their self-image and identity.

Increased opportunities for non-riders to engage with the riding community via communication technology grants access to the interpersonal aspects of motorcycling online, without necessarily being a motorcyclist. As more and more non-riders identify with the motorcycling community, as fans of movies or television shows, or as aspiring motorcycle owners preparing for cultural immersion, these non-riders are carving a niche for their continued participation in motorcycle culture. Individuals taking part in the interpersonal aspects of motorcycling, with or without owning a motorcycle, are engaging in many of the same processes of symbolic appropriation and identity construction within motorcycle culture. Therefore, motorcycle culture, despite being originally based on ownership and physical ridership, is broadening beyond the realm of such exclusive membership requirements.

## Chapter 5

### Motorcycle Culture in Flux

The breadth of subject matter discussed in the previous chapters serves to demystify motorcycle culture by investigating several important facets: motorcycle culture as situated within the conflict of gendered technologies, as it directly stems from Victorian-era conflicts over women's participation in bicycling; how the motorcycle, through physical necessity, is viewed as an extension of the rider, and how this leads to riders' attempts to appropriate cultural artifacts in the process of self-identifying as motorcyclists; and, due to the development of new motorcycle related technologies, the ways in which varying sects of the motorcycling community continue the process of symbolic appropriation in an effort to self-identify as a particular type of motorcyclist, which results in cultural differentiation and exclusionary discourse.

Due in part to the physical relationship between motorcycle and rider, earlier referred to as the human-machine interface, riders come to view the motorcycle as a physical extension of themselves. This identification leads motorcyclists to deeply value the social interpretations of the motorcycle as a symbol, because those social interpretations of symbolic meaning potentially serve to validate or invalidate the individuals' identities. Riders' vested interest in the interpretation of motorcycle related symbols leads them to appropriate the symbols for their means, to align with their self-image. Riders then project their interpretations onto others, and often assume that others should share the same interpretations in order to validate the individual rider's identity. When the interpretations are not shared, the result is a cultural conflict over how to define the cultural symbols (e.g. motorcycles as masculine, Harley-Davidsons as rebellious, sport bikes as the newest and best, etc.). These conflicts are rooted in individuals' desires to align cultural interpretations of motorcycle related symbols to their own



interpretations, in order to validate their perceptions of themselves by way of the generalized other.

Cultural differentiation emerges when competing groups of individuals are able to collectively appropriate symbols differently, resulting in subcultures that are distinctly different despite an abundance of shared attributes. These subcultures share similar interpretations within their cohort, yet those interpretations stand in stark contrast to other cohorts. Perhaps the most fitting example within motorcycle culture is that of the conflict between RUBS and outlaws: while both groups communicate with largely the same symbols (Harley Davidsons, leather gear, patches, etc.), their interpretations and implementation of these symbols directly contradicts the other.

When subcultures with conflicting symbolic interpretations come to exist within proximity, they extend the symbolic battleground beyond the motorcycles themselves. The style, gear, and accessories come into focus as cultural indicators that serve to identify one's place in a particular subculture. The appropriation of motorcycle related symbols, even those beyond the bikes themselves, becomes a type of exclusionary discourse among subcultures. Specific accessories, stylistic choices, and technological implementations become tools for individuals to identify themselves as members of a specific group, both intentionally and unintentionally.

As the number of subcultures proliferates due to cultural differentiation, so too increases the number of acceptable interpretations of cultural symbols. The increasing number of acceptable interpretations, and the increasing variety resulting from cultural variations, carves new cultural niches. These niches contain particular characteristics that are potentially attractive to individuals who were not previously engaged in motorcycle culture. Therefore, individuals who had not participated in motorcycle culture are presented with new opportunities to engage because they are provided new cultural

interpretations of motorcycle related symbols, some of which may be attractive to the potential participants' self-identities. So, while the symbolic value and meaning of motorcycles and their related cultural artifacts are amid ongoing appropriation by competing social groups, the abundance of innovative interpretations provides potential cultural capital for new cultural members to employ in efforts to define themselves. Burgeoning subcultures then serve as recruitment grounds for cultural newcomers who provide social validation for the subculture's ideological interpretations of motorcycle related symbols. As the number of culturally varied participants increases, the potential for competing or conflicting symbolic interpretations also grows, thereby propagating cultural diversification at a potentially exponential rate.

Communication technologies amplify the ease and frequency with which members and non-members can access motorcycle culture. Motorcycle related websites, blogs, publications, movies, television shows, and internet hosted videos, among others, provide opportunities for individuals to engage in social dialogue about motorcycles and their related technologies without requiring face-to-face interaction, without direct physical access to others vested in motorcycle related symbols. This increases the number of potential interactions and the number of potential voices engaging in the process of interpreting motorcycle related symbols. As communication technologies become ever more legitimized means of cultural discourse, the temporal and physical boundaries of motorcycle culture are broadened, and varied interpretations flourish.

By viewing culture as the product of socially mediated interpretations of symbols, as opposed to a uniform social entity, this research shows that culture is a fluid, ever-changing entity based in a state of flux, constantly influencing individual and group actors while simultaneously being influenced by those same actors. In this interpretation of

culture, we find that style (i.e. the way in which people incorporate and appropriate technology and aesthetics) plays a pivotal role as but one of the many manifestations of culture: serving as an indicator of culture's influential power over the consumption and leisure habits of individuals; defining the process of technological and aesthetic integration as a social endeavor by way of the shared interpretations of many actors, and their reflective perspectives of others' interpretations of particular consumer goods; and culture's fragmented nature, in that the varying interpretations of the individuals that comprise culture serve to further its differentiation. Therefore, one may assume that culture is not a static entity or an example of social forces simply dominating the social actions of individuals in a unidirectional fashion. Rather, culture is a term used to describe the social orientations that arise due to individual perceptions that influence and are influenced by socially mediated symbolic meaning.

Understanding culture as a dynamic process leads one to the conclusion that culture is surprisingly democratic, and that a conceptual understanding of any one culture cannot single-handedly explain the behaviors or motivations of all its sects and participants. Culture exists as a fragmented, constantly changing summation of the interpretation trends of individuals surrounding socially-mediated symbolic meaning: culture is situated within a socio-historical context (Lull 1995). Individuals, especially with the increased communication and exchange opportunities of contemporary society, may be thought of as selecting and incorporating particular aspects of a multitude of cultures based on their preferences and circumstances. With this in mind, it may prove beneficial to study motorcycle culture by comparing and contrasting both the similarities and differences among motorcyclists in order to explore the multiple layers of culture and cultural orientations that exist among the riding community, rather than viewing motorcycle culture as some uniform entity.

### Call for Research

It is necessary to investigate several relatively unexplored facets of the motorcycling community in order to further a holistic academic understanding of motorcycle culture in the United States: the role of ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, and religious minorities; the role of the media on riders' and non-riders' symbolic interpretations of motorcycle-related cultural artifacts, and how these interpretations influence identity construction; commodity fetishism, which is especially important as motorcycling becomes another acceptable leisure activity for the American mainstream, thereby increasing the potential for ridership among a larger and more diverse population; how conspicuous consumption influences identity construction and what it is to be a motorcyclist; and implications of the culture industry's commodification of motorcycle culture.

Future research endeavors must be varied in methodological approach to ensure an analysis of motorcycle culture from a multitude of perspectives. Qualitative research has and will continue to perform a necessary function in developing snapshots of rider demographics, trends in commodity exchange, and large-scale inquiries into public perceptions and participation. Qualitative research proves invaluable in exploring cultural artifacts and symbols, and the varying meanings ascribed to them by members of the motorcycling community (both riders and non-riders alike), and should be employed to further investigate the exclusionary discourses and differentiation taking place via symbolic appropriation. Motorcycle culture is also a bountiful temporal and physical landscape for theoretical inquiry, especially for those interested in symbolic interaction, leisure and consumption, lifestyle and cultural studies, and the culture industry. However, it should be noted again, the process of appropriating symbols as cultural capital, and the resulting cultural differentiation, is not specific to motorcycle culture. While this paper

focuses on motorcycle culture, it should be understood that motorcycle culture is used in this context as an analogous entity to enable a discussion of the process of symbolic appropriation that takes place in many cultural interactions. Therefore, it is necessary to call for a greater understanding of symbolic appropriation as an integral part of identity construction within culture beyond the contextual realm of motorcycles.

### Conclusion

Motorcycles themselves, in their differing varieties, are manifestations of technological developments: combustion engines, alloys and composites, electronic capabilities, fuel injection, and so on. Motorcycle culture, similarly, is significantly impacted by technologies that extend well beyond the bikes themselves. When considering motorcycle culture, it is necessary that one be attentive to the impact of protective gear, aesthetics, GPS capabilities, cell phones, Chatterbox communication systems, lightweight and durable digital cameras, internet connectivity, and much more. Yet, as Stebbins explains, simply because some technological development exists does not mean it will be absorbed and implemented by all cultural participants in the same way (2009).

In exploring how and why these particular aspects of technology are adopted or avoided, sought after or left behind, researchers are likely to discover a great deal about how the blanket term "motorcycle culture" falls drastically short of encompassing the diversity that exists within the motorcycling community. The likelihood of such diversity is substantiated when one understands that any explanation of motorcycle culture is effectively an attempt to explain the leisure, consumption, and stylistic tendencies of all motorcyclists, and the array of motivations driving them. It is precisely because culture is constantly influencing individuals while simultaneously being created, maintained, modified and destroyed by those same individuals that researchers find so many

symbolic interpretations regarding many aspects of motorcycle culture: tattoos, leather vests, helmets, patches, color schemes, boots, chrome, riding style, beards, etc.

There are drastically differing cultural orientations that exist simultaneously within the motorcycling community, and the multitude of differences is likely to increase as motorcycle ridership becomes more diverse. When considering the historically unprecedented accessibility to motorcycles, which arises from economic opportunity, cultural attractiveness, the internet, and the increasing acceptance of motorcycles in contemporary American society, researchers are likely to discover levels of variability among the riding community comparable to those found in the non-riding community. Therefore, it may prove beneficial to hone in on more specific cultural anomalies within the motorcycling community, such as the integration of trikes (3-wheeled motorcycles). Another example would be the role of contemporary textiles, such as Gore-Tex and other composites, which will provide cultural maps of symbolic appropriation by determining how various individuals and subcultures react to the developments in alignment with the mandates of their socio-cultural positions. Investigating how these specific technologies travel through the temporal and physical landscape of culture, from the realm of the abnormal and exceptional to the accepted and assimilated, will shed light on the process of cultural creation, modification, and exchange.

The field of motorcycle culture, like many others in contemporary society, is undergoing drastic changes as it incorporates newly developed technologies and social spheres. Only with continued investigation of this lush field will researchers be able to understand that it may be that, in reality, not all who participate in motorcycle culture are not motorcyclists, and that one of the few things all contemporary motorcyclists have in common is the experience of riding a motorcycle.

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Dragons MC and the Black Biker Set*. Minneapolis: MBI Publishing.

### Biographical Information

Paul Dean Blankenship is an adventurer of heart and mind. He is a NAUI certified Master SCUBA Diver, kayak instructor, climbing instructor, USA Boxing coach, and Eagle Scout. He has performed for several locally recognized bands, volunteered as a sound designer and technician for the Butterfly Connection theatre arts company, received numerous awards for his poetry and music performances, and co-founded and co-directed a collaborative community arts and activism project named Kollektive Objective. Amid these projects, he has been repeatedly honored by “Who’s Who Among Students in American Colleges and Universities,” received “Outstanding Junior in Sociology” and “Sociology Scholar” awards, was awarded “Highest Honors” from the Honors College, was twice named a University of Texas at Arlington “University Scholar” (awarded to the top one-percent of the student body), served in multiple undergraduate and graduate assistantships, and received a graduate fellowship from the Honors College. He is also an avid mountain bicyclist and skateboarder, has a keen interest in canoe sailing, and has visited 13 countries (and counting).

Paul received his Associate of Arts degree from Tarrant County College, and his Honors Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, Summa Cum Laude, from University of Texas at Arlington. While in graduate school, he began teaching high school courses for the Fort Worth Independent School District. Upon completion of his Master’s degree, he looks forward to continuing formal and informal projects delving into the realm of identity construction and social behavior.

Paul shares time with his loving partner and wife, Kate, and their twins, Beatrice and Oliver. They currently reside in Fort Worth, Texas.